



**College Knowledge:
Addressing
Information Barriers
to College**

Joel H. Vargas, Ed.D.

**Published by
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The Education Resources Institute (TERI)

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TERI pursues this mission through: (i) efforts to improve K-12 education in our community; (ii) sponsorship of college access information programs and centers; (iii) administration and guarantee of its national and international education loan programs; and (iv) leadership of local and national public policy analyses recommending actions to promote educational opportunity.

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- TERI will partner with other organizations in both its loan programs and college access programs in the pursuit of common objectives to achieve greater results and impacts.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Possessing the knowledge about how to prepare for and apply to college is essential to students' obtaining the opportunity to attend. Yet, getting information and advice about college preparation, financial aid, and planning is most difficult for those young people who are found least often in higher education institutions, namely, low-income students, racial and ethnic minorities, and youth from families with no previous college-going history¹.

These are the unsettling findings of research regarding the role of information and guidance in enabling students to secure a college education. Individuals from families where the parents have not gone to college are less likely to have the personal or institutional connections through which students typically receive encouragement to attend college as well as guidance in the college planning process. Considering how critical college attainment is to future economic status and professional mobility (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999; 2001), policies to promote college access must include a focus on ways to provide underserved students with the information and guidance they need.

A review of the research illustrates the unmet needs of low-income, first-generation, and minority students for information and guidance essential to college access. This study describes the information that constitutes the "college knowledge" needed to apply to and attend college

and analyzes the barriers faced by low-income and minority students and those who are the first generation in their families to attend college. The analysis is based on research reports and syntheses of literature about the role of information, counseling, and other factors in students going to college. The report's main findings are:

- College-preparatory information and guidance are major components in realizing college aspirations.
- Students traditionally underrepresented in higher education do not naturally possess "college knowledge." Most come from families with limited or no college experience and attend schools that provide only minimal college guidance.
- The knowledge gap for underrepresented students is exacerbated by their limited access to technology and technological innovations in college admissions and recruitment via the Internet.
- Finally, although the information gap problem is severe, it is not insurmountable. Research suggests that interventions focused on providing information and guidance about college to underrepresented students and families, both early and often, can supply them with the "college knowledge" they sorely need.

INTRODUCTION

Considerable research has been conducted on the barriers to higher education access and success faced by low-income students and those who are the first generation in their families to attend college. This paper discusses much of that research and summarizes the main findings. Several key findings clearly demonstrate the reasons why college-preparatory information and guidance for underserved students are so important:

- Because underrepresented students and their families lack basic knowledge about the college-going process, they have a great need for extensive information, beginning as early as the 5th grade, related to connecting their possible career interests with their educational goals, describing the courses they need for college admission, and explaining the availability of financial aid.
- Underrepresented students also have a great need for intensive guidance in order to talk through their fears and concerns about

college, their aspirations and their educational and career goals, their need for financial aid, and the decision-making process related to college attendance.

- Regrettably, the students who have the greatest need for access to college preparatory materials and to one-on-one guidance are usually the ones least likely to receive these services in their schools due to such constraints as reductions in the size of school guidance staffs, the huge student-to-guidance counselor ratios at many schools, and the necessity of the overburdened guidance staff to concentrate on discipline issues and administrative tasks.

Although college information and guidance services are oftentimes not readily available to disadvantaged and low-income students in their schools, they are available in those cities across the country that have community-based college access centers.

How College Knowledge Helps

Nicole Yandow began participating in the **Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC)** Outreach Program in the fall of her junior year at Colchester High School in Vermont on the advice of her guidance counselor. Nicole came from a single parent family with a modest income where she was the first person to aspire to higher education. She was an excellent student, maintaining a 3.92 GPA, while working two part-time jobs.

Nicole knew that she wanted to go to college, but she needed help identifying appropriate colleges to apply to based on her interests, and help with applying for financial aid. Financial aid was very important in her decision about where to go college. She reported that counselors at VSAC “were very helpful in explaining the financial aid process, assisting me with the financial aid forms, and interpreting the types of financial aid for me.”

As a result of the financial aid she received, Nicole was able to enroll in the University of Vermont.

WHAT ROLE DOES INFORMATION PLAY IN COLLEGE ACCESS?

Knowledge about college throughout the middle and high school years plays an important role in securing access to higher learning, from cultivating college aspirations to choosing an appropriate college and getting financial aid. There is evidence to suggest that students are more likely to attain a college education when they and their families are informed about how to prepare and plan for it.

Parents have a critical impact on the college aspirations of their children. Such aspirations are a prerequisite for, and indeed may statistically relate to college attendance (St. John, 1991). Children of more educated parents are more likely to develop college aspirations than those with less educated parents. College-educated parents communicate their educational “values” to students, are “familiar with the [college] experience and are better equipped to explain . . . how the college system is structured, how it works, and how the student can prepare for it” (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999, p. 26).

Above and beyond whether students possess the academic qualifications or desire to attend college, when the time comes to apply, access to “college knowledge” may determine whether or not they ultimately go. Studies suggest that college qualified low-income students who receive college preparatory guidance are more likely to attend college than those who don’t (King, 1996). Those taking the appropriate admissions steps are as likely as college-eligible students from middle-income backgrounds to enroll in college (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Choy, 1998).

Even high achieving students from low-income backgrounds who aspire to attend college often encounter informational barriers which may prevent their enrollment. For example, only 53 percent of low-income students with high standardized test scores enrolled in college if neither they nor their parents “[spoke] to someone about financial aid” (Akerhielm et al., 1998) whereas 84 percent of low-income students who reported that they or their parents consulted with someone enrolled in college. (Akerhielm et al., 1998).

Research also indicates that most low-income students make notably different types of college choices than

higher-income students. One study found that “students with less educated or lower-income parents . . . were especially likely to attend lower-selectivity institutions, even if their academic ability and achievements were high” (Hearn, 1991, p. 164). This finding suggests that low-income students are not fully aware of their college options nor do they develop higher aspirations regarding college selection. Other research findings show that low-income students are not encouraged by their families, communities, or schools to broaden their college-option horizons (Horvat, 1996; McDonough, 1997).

WHO POSSESSES WHAT KINDS OF COLLEGE KNOWLEDGE?

Low-income, minority and first generation students are especially likely to lack specific types of “college knowledge,” which appears to be of substantial importance. They often do not understand the steps necessary to prepare for higher education. These steps include knowing about how to finance a college education, to complete basic admissions procedures, and to make connections between career goals and educational requirements. Underrepresented students especially need encouragement to take rigorous college-preparatory courses and to consider an appropriate range of college options, in light of the role college selection plays in future academic success and college persistence.

Inequities in college knowledge may result from the fact that the families of underrepresented students do not have experience or familiarity with the educational system leading to college. Students do not naturally inherit the “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1973) necessary to realize or to perceive themselves as being entitled to certain educational opportunities (Lareau, 1989; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 1998a; Perna, 1998b).

Some of the major differences and discrepancies in college knowledge and guidance are discussed below.

Paying for College

Parents and students from underrepresented groups consistently are the most misinformed about college costs and financial aid. They commonly overestimate college costs and are unaware of the possibility of and procedures for receiving financial aid to pay for college.

An American Council on Education (ACE) study found that the “most uninformed and fearful” respondents regarding college financing were “first-generation college families, minority group members, and those with low incomes” (Ikenberry & Hartle, 1998). While a more recent follow-up study by ACE showed improvements in financial aid awareness, the authors warned that the continued “pronounced” level of misunderstandings about the cost of college among underrepresented populations could still discourage them from attending (Ikenberry & Hartle 2000). Another study found that low-income parents often did not realize that most financial aid is awarded on the basis of financial need rather than academic merit, and many low-income parents of high-achieving students simply “did not know how” to apply for financial aid (Akerhielm et al., 1998, p. 56).

Lacking financial aid information clearly can discourage students from pursuing college. Research suggests that parents’ expressions of discouragement about college plans and students’ non-enrollment may be directly related to the lack of adequate information about college costs and financial aid (Akerhielm et al., 1998; General Accounting Office, 1990; Ikenberry & Hartle, 1998; Post, 1990; Virginia State Department of Education, 1993).

How College Knowledge Helps

Barbara Camille graduated from East Boston High School in Massachusetts. She came from a family that puts a high value on education. She maintained a 3.31 average, while working part time developing programs for school children who visited the Boston Children's Museum.

Barbara was encouraged by a friend to visit Boston's **Higher Education Information Center**. She said that the assistance she received in thinking through what she might like to do professionally after college helped her determine where she would apply. The counselors also helped her through the financial aid application process. She applied to several colleges and was admitted to LeMoyné College in New York with financial aid.

Applying to College

The processes involved in applying to college—taking the SAT or the ACT, for instance—may seem to be common knowledge, but they are not obvious to underrepresented students and their families. Research shows that first-generation, low-income, and minority students are less likely than others to take college entrance examinations or complete application procedures, even when they aspire to college (Orfield & Paul, 1994) and are otherwise “college-qualified” (Berkner & Chavez, 1997). A recent report found that among African-American and Hispanic seniors who took the ACT college admissions exam, many said that while their parents encouraged their college pursuits, they also “often were unaware of the many steps involved in postsecondary planning” (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002).

These findings underscore the likelihood that the failure of underrepresented students to prepare for college is not solely attributable to absence of ability or will. Rather, these students and their families often do not receive basic information about college admissions requirements. They also may find it challenging to manage all of the various deadlines and paperwork associated with applying to college and for financial aid (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). The acute need among underrepresented students for information and guidance in negotiating admissions and financial aid procedures is also echoed in earlier research reports (Dixon, 1986; National Student Aid Coalition, 1985).

Connecting Career and Educational Plans

Academic preparation is an essential part of career and college planning. Since many professions require specific training and credentials, students need to know what educational pathways will lead to their desired goals and how current academic performance affects future options. Yet, underrepresented students often do not connect future career expectations with current educational decisions (Arbona, 1994).

Even though low-income middle school students consistently express high academic and occupational aspirations, often they do not demonstrate realism of choice or planfulness in

their career development . . . Students also need to become aware of the relationship between their high school grades and curriculum, and their probabilities to attend college and attain their occupational aspirations in the future (Arbona, 1994, p. 21).

Likewise, a study of high school students in Indiana found that while students overwhelmingly expressed “high hopes” for their educational and career advancement, they often faced “long odds” in realizing these hopes because they lacked tangible knowledge about how their current academic choices affected their future goals (Orfield & Paul, 1994).

Parental influence is also pivotal to helping students make connections between academic preparation and careers. Parents with less formal education are less likely than others to engage in discussions with their children about career plans (Arbona, 1994; Southeastern Educational Improvement Lab, 1989; Wells & Gaus, 1991).

High School Course Taking

Research demonstrates that students who take rigorous college preparatory courses are much more likely to attend college (Akerhielm et al., 1998; Horn, 1997; Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992; Pelavin & Kane, 1990). Yet, when compared to high-income students and those whose parents have more education, underrepresented students are less likely to take courses that predict college enrollment or that are required for admission (Akerhielm et al., 1998; Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Orfield & Paul, 1994).

One reason for such disparities may be that students and their parents may not know the significance of taking certain courses. For example, among 487 students from Massachusetts middle schools serving high concentrations of minority and low-income youth, many students planned to attend college, but only a fraction intended to take the courses in high school needed for college admission (Mayer, 1991). Parents of underrepresented students are less likely than other parents to know about the repercussions of current course choices on future class placements, to know about the differences between high school curricular tracks, or to feel entitled to request

How College Knowledge Helps

Charles Berry graduated from Strawberry Mansion High School in Philadelphia in 2000 with a GPA of 3.2. He attends the University of the Arts in Philadelphia majoring in computer graphics and minoring in dance.

Charles became involved in the **Philadelphia College Access Center** in middle school. He used many of the College Access Center services while he was in high school, including information resources and advising services. He said that, “If I hadn’t had the help, guidance, and encouragement from my access center counselor, I would not have gone to college.” His counselor encouraged him to choose a major that he knew he would enjoy; as a result, he is combining his interests with his creative talents in the arts.

How College Knowledge Helps

Frank Baptiste, a graduate of Colchester High School in Vermont, is from a single parent family whose only income is disability insurance. He always worked hard in school and challenged himself academically by taking honors and upper-level courses. While maintaining a 3.5 GPA in high school, Frank worked at Dunkin Donuts after school and on weekends.

Frank participated in the **Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC)** Outreach Program beginning in middle school. While in middle school, he met with a mentor who helped him focus on school and assisted him with planning his high school courses. During high school, he received help from VSAC in goal setting, college planning and career exploration. Frank said that the VSAC staff and volunteers “always encouraged me to challenge myself and to aim high, and they helped me to stay on track.” As a result of the support he received, Frank applied to several private colleges and the University of New Hampshire where he is now a student.

changes to higher-level courses for their children (South-eastern Educational Improvement Lab, 1989; Useem, 1992; Yonezawa, 1997). Student and parental confusion about courses can be compounded when high schools offer a wide variety of courses, which include non-college preparatory classes (Lee, 1993; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985).

Students’ need for the information and encouragement to take challenging high school courses is particularly critical because of the effects of course taking on academic achievement and college degree completion. A report (Oakes et al., 2000) on the distribution of advanced courses in California high schools described the importance of high school courses in these terms:

Several studies have documented that the more academic courses students take, the more positive their schooling outcomes. Advanced courses, in particular, have positive effects on student achievement, particularly in science and mathematics, in students’ preparedness for college, and in their success in college-level work. (p. 16).

Given the importance of a student’s high school course-taking record as a factor in completing a four-year college degree (Adelman 1999), students who receive the information regarding the proper courses to take are more likely to develop the academic skills associated with degree completion.

College Selection

When exploring and applying to colleges, knowing how to identify a list of appropriate colleges from numerous options has important consequences. Research shows that finding a college which coincides with students’ social and academic expectations and interests may be a critical factor in their success in and completion of college (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995; Merisotis, 2000). Further, students who engage in more “diverse” information gathering may subsequently be more satisfied with their college choices than those who do not (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996). Students attending more selective colleges are more likely to persist to degree completion than students attending less selective schools, even when comparing students with comparable pre-college academic achievements (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Kane, 1998).

Low-income students are less likely to engage in wide-ranging information gathering, which may be related to finding a good college match (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996). Also when compared to students of other social backgrounds but with similar levels of academic performance, students from underrepresented backgrounds are more likely to attend two-year colleges or less selective four-year colleges (Choy, 1998, Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Gándara & Bial, 2001; Hearn, 1991). Even though two-year colleges play an important role in the higher education system², these findings suggest many such students are unaware of the full range of college options available to them³.

HOW WELL DO SCHOOLS MEET THE COLLEGE KNOWLEDGE NEEDS OF LOW-INCOME AND UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS?

Students who are less likely to have the initial knowledge required to find their way to college necessarily rely more heavily on their schools for such information (General Accounting Office, 1990; Orfield et al., 1984). Studies suggest that there is a positive correlation between students' access to counselors in high school and their enrollment in college preparatory classes. (Gándara et al., 1998; Lee & Ekstrom, 1987).

Unfortunately, those students who need access to college-preparatory guidance in schools are most often the least likely to receive it. Within public schools, guidance-counseling resources are at a premium with average ratios of 500 students for every counselor (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Furthermore, guidance counselors frequently are preoccupied with pressing disciplinary issues or administrative tasks, which take time from providing college advising (Arbona, 1994; Hart & Jacobi, 1992; Orfield & Paul, 1994; Steinberg, 1988; Virginia State Department of Education, 1993). Counselors also may not have received adequate training to

offer up-to-date guidance with regard to higher education or the labor market (Hart & Jacobi, 1992; Orfield & Paul, 1994). In confronting such institutional constraints, they may be forced to be more "reactive" than "proactive" in providing college-preparatory advising (Hart & Jacobi, 1992, p. 29). Thus, they may, by default, favor students who are more aggressive in seeking them out or students whom they perceive to be college 'material' (Hart & Jacobi, 1992; Virginia State Department of Education, 1993).

Among public schools, many inequities exist in the availability of college guidance. In terms of time dedicated to college counseling, student-to-counselor ratios, and the frequency of student-to-counselor contact about college, schools serving more low-income and minority students on average appear to offer less guidance than those serving higher-income and predominantly white populations (Holmes, 1986; Lee & Ekstrom 1987; Orfield et al., 1984; Steinberg, 1988). Other examples of inter-school inequities may include the greater rates at which counselors from higher-income schools avail themselves of professional development opportunities (Hart & Jacobi, 1992) and the lower frequency with which college admissions representatives visit lower-income schools (Holmes, 1986). Thus, it appears that students who do not initially have college preparatory knowledge are often at risk of not receiving it from what could be a ready source.

Recent school counseling research provides detailed descriptions of the role schools play in students' selection of colleges. For example, depending on schools' social compositions, their college counseling systems may implicitly communicate different expectations to students about their college options, and reinforce and reflect, rather than expand, students' existing preferences and aspirations for various colleges (McDonough, 1997). Different schools may organize college counseling in ways that encourage students to employ different strategies for admission and to

How College Knowledge Helps

Nicole Bervine was a senior at Benjamin Franklin High School in Philadelphia, PA. She maintained a 3.2 GPA and wanted a career in social work. She applied to and was accepted at Westchester University, Lincoln University, and Kutztown University.

Nicole is enthusiastic about the assistance that she received from the **Philadelphia College Access Center**. She said her high school guidance counselor had so many students to advise that it was not possible for her to get the help she needed in school. The College Access Center advisors were able to give her the time that she needed, and “were very understanding and helpful.”

pursue different types of colleges—private school students applying to a broader array of institutions geographically and in terms of selectivity than public school students, for example (Horvat, 1996).

Evidence about school-based college guidance indicates that counseling needs to be better structured to help underrepresented students improve their preparation for college and to broaden their consideration of college options. The Education Trust and others are currently working to promote improvements in several facets of school counseling and consider the effort integral to school reform (The Education Trust, 2001). Without improvements to school counseling, underrepresented students may be left in a situation which Arbona (1994) characterizes as “double jeopardy,” referring to the lack of financial aid counseling offered by low-income schools whose students “are in most need of help from counselors regarding postsecondary education financing; however, because of lack of counseling resources in low-income schools, they are unlikely to receive such help” (p. 20).

CAN TECHNOLOGY HELP TO EQUALIZE ACCESS TO COLLEGE KNOWLEDGE?

The explosion of Internet use for college search and application processes on its face holds great promise for equalizing students’ access to college knowledge. Those students and families with the greatest need for college information, however, are the same ones who have least access to Internet technology (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999; 2000). The move toward greater technological innovation in college admissions processes could in fact exacerbate existing college inequities, in the absence of a thoughtful policy to prevent that from occurring.

College Marketing and Recruitment via the Internet

The Internet is quickly redefining how students seek out and apply for higher education. Many colleges are moving away from costly view books and instead using Internet capabilities to tailor the information and advertisements they send to students, through electronic mail marketing made possible by the purchase of students’ e-mail addresses from the College Board and others

(Marklein, 2000a; Marklein, 2000b). In admissions, colleges and state university systems see increasing numbers of students submit their applications via the Internet, with some schools even offering incentives for electronic submission through discounted application fees (Gottlieb, 2000; Marklein, 2000b). The U.S. Department of Education reports that student applications for federal financial aid filed over the Internet are more accurate than those mailed on paper and that electronic filers receive the benefit of immediate computer estimations of their Expected Family Contribution toward college costs (Colon, 2001).

The growing importance of the Internet as a source of college knowledge is illustrated in a survey of college-bound students who reported that the Internet ranked second only to guidance counselors in their decisions about where to apply to college (Art & Science Group Inc., 2000). The prevalence of new technology in obtaining college knowledge calls attention to the issue of who has access to the technology.

The U.S. Department of Commerce's periodic survey of technology use shows low-income and minority groups have less home access to computers and the Internet than others (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999; 2000). Only 10 percent of households with annual incomes of \$15,000 or under, for example, have Internet access whereas over 80 percent of families with incomes of over \$75,000 have access. Similarly, less than 25 percent of African American students have Internet access as opposed to almost 50 percent of white students.

The technological picture is not entirely bleak. Community points of access to technology provide important alternative channels of connection to the Internet for low-income and minority groups, who are far more likely than others to rely on libraries' and schools' computing resources for Internet-related tasks (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999; 2000). Yet, current community access may not be adequately meeting the technological needs of underrepresented populations.

Evidence that low-income schools have on average slower Internet connections than wealthier schools (Gladfelter, 2000), for example, indicates the need to improve community access. Studies about the technological resources of the federally sponsored TRIO college

How College Knowledge Helps

Dominique Thompson was a senior at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Lifelong Learning, a public K-12 school in Milwaukee. Through his work with **COMPASS Guide**, a virtual college information center in Milwaukee, and the help that he received from the COMPASS staff, Dominique identified several University of Wisconsin campuses as well as out-of-state colleges that interested him. He saved this information in his "virtual locker"—a component of the COMPASS Guide program designed to help students easily search, save, and retrieve information as part of the college-planning process.

How College Knowledge Helps

Vania Calderon, a first generation college student, graduated from the J. Eugene McAteer High School in San Francisco, California with a 2.68 average and enrolled in San Francisco State University.

Vania began visiting the **San Francisco College Resource Center** in her sophomore year in high school. She knew that she wanted to attend college, but she needed help finding appropriate higher education institutions, understanding the admissions process, and identifying sources of financial aid. Her center advisor provided her with information materials, as well as help thinking through possible career goals, selecting appropriate colleges, and applying for financial aid.

access programs illustrate the urgency of this need. Upward Bound and Talent Search—programs serving college-aspiring and college-qualified students from underrepresented college backgrounds—report that their students have little access to technology at home, school, or in the community (Norfles, 2000a; 200b). Furthermore, programs possessing the fewest technological resources themselves tend to be those serving students in the most severe need of access.

HOW CAN WE MEET THE NEEDS OF LOW-INCOME AND UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE KNOWLEDGE?

Despite the disparities in access to college information and guidance, research suggests informational interventions can help to address these inequities. Policies designed to promote college access, therefore, should include providing information and advice, early and often, during key stages in students' educational careers.

Research shows that receiving college information and participating in organized programs that provide college information are associated with improved college access. In one study among students typically at risk of not reaching college, those more likely to attend college reported having participated in "college preparation activities" or having discussed financial aid with someone (Horn & Chen, 1998). Another study found that low-income students were more likely to take the steps associated with subsequent college enrollment if they reported "[speaking] with at least one person about financial aid" (Berkner & Chavez, 1997, p. 60).

Participation in programs with prominent information components also was found to be related to students' college-preparatory course taking or plans to take such courses (Gándara et al., 1998; Merisotis, 2000) and may be associated with college enrollment (Horn & Chen, 1998; Merisotis, 2000).

The evidence about the role of information and guidance in college access suggests several key elements of effective informational interventions.

- **Early intervention should begin in elementary school in order to play a role in developing college plans which students may form as early as 8th or 9th grade** (Hossler et al., 1999). Information at an early stage should be tailored to the appropriate developmental level and focus intensively on the link between career and educational plans, the various ways of financing a college education, and the availability of financial aid (Hossler et al., 1999).
- **Information about college financing and financial aid should target parents.** Parents often believe that college is more expensive than it actually is and, therefore, beyond their reach. When parents are informed about the various ways that a higher education can be financed, and they begin to save for their children’s college education, this has a positive influence on students’ educational plans (Hossler et al., 1999).
- **Information and guidance in middle school and throughout high school should focus on ensuring that students take the most challenging academic courses possible.** Guidance should include informing students and families about the importance of taking college preparatory courses and about the significance of Advanced Placement (AP) and honors courses in gaining college admission (also see Oakes et al., 2000).
- **High school students and families need to understand the importance of taking college entrance examinations and meeting registration deadlines. They also are likely to need assistance with completing financial aid forms and navigating through the college admissions process in general.**
- **Guidance at the college application stage should focus on encouraging students to research and apply to a wider array of colleges than they might normally consider** in addition to helping students distinguish between private and public colleges and two-year and four-year schools—something low-income students are not always able to do (Ikenberry & Hartle, 1998).

How College Knowledge Helps

Precious Butler, a student at Hyde Park High School in Boston, lived with her grandmother and helped her take care of the younger siblings after school while maintaining a 3.0 GPA.

A counselor from the **Higher Education Information Center** visited her high school twice a week, and Precious met with him for the past two years to talk about career interests and colleges that might be appropriate for her. She also went on field trips to various colleges, in Massachusetts, DC and Connecticut. She stated that her counselor helped her to understand and navigate the admissions and the financial aid processes and complete the right forms. “He was very supportive,” she said.

- **Substantial investment in the technological infrastructure will allow students to keep pace with the increasing volume of college-related transactions conducted over the Internet.** Increasing community points of access outside of the home should be one important consideration.

Community-based college access centers, located in the inner-city in several communities throughout the country, are a promising alternative for providing college information and guidance to students. Located in public libraries, churches, and low-income neighborhoods, these centers provide free information and guidance services. While open to everyone, the centers target primarily underrepresented and disadvantaged populations. Services include college awareness activities, college advising, help locating financial aid, and application assistance. Most offer high speed Internet access and support in using available technology to facilitate the college search and application process.

Centers are funded from public and private sources, including the federal TRIO programs (Talent Search and EOC).

Highlighting the need for college information and advising does not downplay the need for addressing other factors, which present barriers to college access. Supporting high school success in college-preparatory courses is another critical need, along with providing students with mentors who can provide social guidance to students in their academic lives (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). Yet, policies designed to expand higher education opportunity should include, as one important dimension, interventions addressing the inequities in college knowledge. Policies establishing alternative sources of college planning information, guidance, and technology access, also hold promise for helping first-generation, low-income, and minority students plan for and obtain access to postsecondary education.

ENDNOTES

¹ For findings about disproportionate college attendance by underrepresented students, see (Cuccaro-Alamin, 1997; Gladieux, 1996; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; McDonough, 1997; Orfield & Miller, 1998; Orfield & Paul, 1994; The Education Trust, 1996).

² For example, Associate's Degree completion may be associated with future earnings (Brown, 1999; National Center for Education Statistics, 2001).

³ Also see discussion later in this paper of (Horvat, 1996) and (McDonough, 1997a).

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 1995, The Education Resources Institute (TERI), with support from the Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, embarked on a college access center replication project for the purpose of promoting college going among low-income students and those who are the first generation in their families to attend college. The project involved establishing community-based college access centers in several cities modeled after the highly successful Higher Education Information Center in Boston, Massachusetts which was launched by TERI in 1985. This paper, which analyzes the research on the importance of college-preparatory information and guidance to underserved students, is one component of the project funded by Wallace-Reader's Digest. The others are:

- **A Guide to Establishing College Access Centers**—The Guide serves as a blueprint for other communities interested in establishing centers. It describes what a college access center is and the steps that are necessary in order to start and sustain a center.
- **College Access Program/Center Toolkit**—The Toolkit contains specific descriptions of fully operational community-based programs and centers as well as numerous examples of actual materials used to plan, start, and sustain a program or a center.
- **Paths Toward College: Follow-Up Study of Clients Served by College Access Centers**—The purpose of the study, which was conducted by the Opinion Dynamics Corporation, a nationally known and recognized survey research company, was to determine the effectiveness of three of the college access centers described in **A Guide to Establishing College Access Centers** in addressing the needs of low-income youth and their families for college planning information and assistance. The study results demonstrate that these centers have a positive influence on low-income and underserved students' college decision-making process, their ability to finance college, and their ability to prepare for college entrance exams. The results also show that the college access centers are successful in increasing the college-going rates of disadvantaged youth and those who are the first generation in their families to attend postsecondary education.

For print copies of the Guide or the Follow-Up Study, contact:

College Access Services
The Education Resources Institute (TERI)
31 St. James Avenue, 6th Floor
Boston, MA 02116
TEL: 1-800-255-8374, ext. 0535

**For access to the Guide, Toolkit, Follow-Up Study,
and/or this paper on the web, visit the TERI website at:**

www.teri.org.