

Engaging a Systemic Partnership to Increase College Access and Success

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Abstract

Systemic, university-school-community partnerships characterize efforts by Georgia State University to enhance preparation of urban teachers and urban student success. A partnership with the Atlanta Housing Authority focuses on family education in mixed-income communities. Work with the National Parks Service's Martin Luther King, Jr., Center produced interactive curriculum for student visitors. Early College High School is an all-university commitment with the Atlanta Public Schools to support high school students earning college credit on the GSU campus. And the DREAMS project serves African American students at three professional development schools helping them to stay in school, achieve academic success, and prepare for college.

As the state's only urban research university, Georgia State University (GSU) offers educational opportunities for traditional and nontraditional students at both the graduate and undergraduate levels by blending the best of theoretical and applied inquiry, scholarly and professional pursuits, and scientific and artistic expression. As an urban research university with strong disciplinary-based departments and a wide array of problem-oriented interdisciplinary programs, the goal of the university is to develop, transmit, and utilize knowledge in order to provide access to quality education for diverse groups of students, to educate leaders for the state of Georgia and the nation, and to prepare citizens for lifelong learning in a global society. The College of Education at GSU uses collaboration as one vehicle to provide access to quality education. One program that overtly illustrates collaboration is the Professional Development Schools/Partnerships Develop Success initiative (PDS²). The PDS² initiative is facilitated through collaboration across higher education institutions and public school systems in the metropolitan Atlanta area. At Georgia State, PDS² encompasses a systemic university-school-community partnership.

PDS²—Professional Development Schools/Partnerships Develop Success Program

Through PDS² partnerships, GSU's College of Education and P-12 schools share the goal of enhancing the education of professionals through a serious commitment to collaboration. All involved share the belief that theory and practice are inextricably intertwined.

The PDS² initiative has a four-fold mission:

1. the preparation and retention of new teachers, counselors, psychologists and school leaders;
2. faculty development;
3. inquiry directed at the improvement of practice; and
4. enhanced student achievement.

This mission is fulfilled through a number of collaborative initiatives including partnerships with the Atlanta Housing Authority, the National Parks Service and two with area school districts focused on urban student access and college readiness—Early College High School and the DREAMS program.

Partnership with the Atlanta Housing Authority: Good Neighbor Program

The College of Education and the Alonzo A. Crim Center for Urban Educational Excellence (Crim Center) have partnered and collaborated with The Atlanta Housing Authority since 2003 to facilitate the Good Neighbor Program (GNP). GNP is designed to educate families on issues related to living in mixed-income communities. Families complete a four-module training session that addresses crime prevention, parental involvement in school, how to prepare for self-sufficiency, and how to adjust to a new community. Each participant receives a certificate of completion and achievement signed by the Dean of the College of Education. Currently, more than 10,000 tenants have been trained in the Good Neighbor Program at GSU.

Partnership with the National Parks Service

The College of Education and the Crim Center have also partnered with the National Parks Service's Martin Luther King, Jr. Center to provide appropriate grade-level material across disciplines for use before, during and after visiting the King Center. The curriculum is designed to encourage hands-on, interactive exploration of materials available in the King Center. It also emphasizes history and character-building including activities in which students can name leadership qualities, conduct oral history interviews with civil rights participants and learn Dr. King's principles of non-violence by developing ways to solve social problems and become advocates for themselves and for others.

These partnerships and collaborative efforts focus on boundary-crossing partnerships to enhance successful outcomes for Atlanta's high-needs students. The partnerships have created new opportunities and several new initiatives. Two of these initiatives are specifically designed to impact urban student academic achievement and college readiness and access: the Early College High School and the DREAMS program. Both of these programs are relatively new and their long-term impact is yet to be measured. Nonetheless, they have demonstrated the potential that systemic partnerships have to actively engage students, parents, educators, and community agencies on multiple

levels in addressing and attacking the challenges that prevent academic success and access to postsecondary education for students who attend urban schools.

Early College High School

In 2005 Atlanta Public Schools (APS) and GSU extended their longstanding partnership by agreeing to develop together an Early College High School (ECHS), one of four small high schools located at the New Schools at Carver campus. The partnership, formalized between the superintendent of APS and the president of GSU, brings together the resources of both institutions. Other partners in the Early College High School include the Georgia Institute of Technology and Emory University as well as a number of philanthropic organizations including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Arthur Blank Family Foundation.

This is an all-university commitment. ECHS engages faculty members from the College of Education, the College of Arts and Sciences as well as staff from the Office of Undergraduate Students and Admissions in making the first Early College Program in Georgia a model for new programs around the state. Students are provided with tutoring services and mentoring by GSU student organizations. The instructional program, support services, and special activities for ECHS students are designed to foster student success and to prepare the students for postsecondary education. The goal of the project is to support students in graduating with a high school diploma and up to 60 hours of college credit, making them eligible to enroll in a bachelor's program at GSU or any other university of their choice.

Beginning in 2006, the students were able to earn college credit by attending classes on GSU's campus. In addition to earning college credits and engaging in mentorships with undergraduate students, twenty-four students were funded to study abroad in Panama and Costa Rico during summer 2007 and another group of nineteen ECHS students were funded to study abroad in Japan during summer 2008. Each year students in the ECHS program are given the opportunity to study abroad, creating educational and multicultural experiences.

ECHS encourages parents of the students to participate in the PTA and to come in quarterly to help plan their child's activities on GSU's campus. Also, ECHS plans to expand parental involvement by inviting the parents to a meeting at GSU every semester in order to help increase home-school collaboration efforts. During the 2007-2008 academic year eighty-five students were enrolled in college courses as part of the ECHS project. The fall 2008 enrollment was expected to reach approximately 175 students. Preliminary outcome analysis of the program indicates that students engaged in the program have high levels of academic efficacy and that they exceed the overall attendance rates in Atlanta Public Schools.

The DREAMS Project

In addition to the ECHS initiative, the DREAMS Project (Developing Relationships to Enhance All Mentees' Success) was designed to serve African American students at three professional development schools in Atlanta and Fulton County including the ECHS. The DREAMS initiative includes a male component, called the Jegna Brotherhood and a female component entitled the Ananse Aya Sisterhood. The goals of DREAMS are linked to the major transition periods during the students' high school career (grades 9-12). The goals include:

- increasing the academic performance level on standardized tests;
- increasing the number of African American male and female students who remain in programs focused on high school graduation; and
- empowering students and their parents to attend postsecondary institutions through increased awareness of financial aid, scholarship opportunities, tutoring, mentoring and academic advisement.

The DREAMS-Jegna Brotherhood works toward these goals through a mentorship program that lasts throughout the students' academic year. Male undergraduate students from GSU develop projects and facilitate discussions centered around youth empowerment with the goal of increasing the participants' likelihood to graduate from high school, matriculate into college, and form a positive self-identity. After completing training sessions facilitated by GSU students at the graduate level, the undergraduate mentors lead weekly meetings with the Jegna participants.

Similar to the Jegna Brotherhood, the Ananse Aya Sisterhood is led throughout the academic year by female undergraduate students who are trained by GSU students at the graduate level. The goals of Ananse Aya include educational and economic empowerment, leadership skill enhancement, cultural awareness, gender identity development, and increased self-efficacy.

In support of the DREAMS program, the Crim Center at GSU sponsors a two- or three-week summer leadership and mentorship institute for the Jegna Brotherhood and Ananse Aya Sisterhood. This institute is designed to engage DREAMS students in activities that develop social competency, increase self-understanding, and contribute to positive self-image. In 2007, sixty students participated in DREAMS, including twenty from ECHS. Eighty-five students were expected to participate in DREAMS during the summer of 2008.

In addition to the 2007 student summer leadership institute, a parent leadership academy was held concurrently. This Parents Empowering Parents (PEP) program focused on increasing parents' capacity-building, parent-school involvement, and awareness of the availability and accessibility of resources for their children's postsecondary education.

As the DREAMS program matures, evaluation will focus on measuring participants' academic achievement, school attendance, college readiness, academic self-efficacy, and the sustainability of the partnership. To date, students who have participated in the Jegna Brotherhood and ECHS project exhibit high levels of self-perceived academic efficacy, higher standardized test scores than the system average of African American students and significantly better overall attendance. Each of these dimensions are important for academic success and progress toward postsecondary education.

Analysis of focus group sessions held with African American mentors of Ananse Aya yielded six emergent themes in their experiences with developing and implementing a culturally-relevant mentoring initiative. The first theme was recognition of pervasive problems associated with the African American female experience including low self-esteem, depression, suicide, sexual and physical abuse. The second theme was an ethic of care which manifested as the participants' personal commitment to help African American girls recognize their strengths. Third, instructors found benefits in discovering commonalities in the African American female experience as they shared their cultural background with those they mentored. The fourth emergent theme was the bi-directional benefits experienced within the mentoring relationships. African American female mentors and those mentored engaged in a collective dialogue that made struggling together a powerful experience in self-definition. Mentors at times assumed roles as sister-friends and other-mothers in order to gain and maintain trust with those mentored within the group. Finally, the theme of birthing a collective voice emerged in which mentors and those mentored identified with the group and began to speak together on issues within and outside of the group.

Outcomes of the DREAMS program will continue to be measured and disseminated in order to further develop the programs and share its successes with others.

Author Information

Dr. Gwendolyn Benson is the principal investigator on several federally-funded programs in Georgia State University's College of Education including the Professional Development Schools (PDS) project and the Early College High School. The PDS project partners the College of Education with urban school systems surrounding Georgia State University. Early College High School is a collaboration between Georgia State University and Atlanta Public Schools.

Also at Georgia State University, Dr. Susan Crim McClendon is the principal investigator on several government-funded projects including Jumpstart, an early literacy program funded by Americorp, and the Good Neighbor Program which is a collaboration between GSU and the Atlanta Housing Authority. The Crim Center also sponsors the DREAMS program.

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