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A University Helps Prepare Low Income Youths for College: Tracking School Success

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# A University Helps Prepare Low Income Youths for College

## Tracking School Success

### *Introduction*

Over the last decade various programs that have helped boost enrollment in higher education have come under attack or have been eliminated. One response to the problem of maintaining access to postsecondary education in an era when policies and programs such as affirmative action and remedial education are terminated is to turn renewed attention to the public schools. A public clamor continues to be heard that the schools need to turn out students who are better prepared for college-level work. The assumption is that if the schools improve, then those who graduate from them will not need affirmative action or remedial education. Although such an assumption is debatable and broad agreement exists that the public schools can improve, such a generic long-term solution falls short with regard to what should be done immediately to help those students who desire access to postsecondary education. The transformation of the American public school system is a massive undertaking that has no clear singular solution in sight and is surely not an immediate cure-all.

What might be done on a more concrete and immediate level to ensure that more students gain access to postsecondary education? In this arti-

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cle we discuss college preparation programs for low-income urban minority youths. Such programs assume that postsecondary institutions have a responsibility to the larger society and that this responsibility gets played out via the relationships that colleges and universities develop with public schools.

We begin by offering an overview of models of college preparation that are in use by describing the kind of student who might participate in such a program. We then turn to an analysis of one program—the Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI)—and discuss the theoretical framework on which this program is based. NAI developed in large part due to a university’s assumption that an institution has a social responsibility to the students and families in whose neighborhood the institution resides. The data derive from a three-year study that included interviews, focus groups, observations, life histories, and an analysis of the students’ college-going patterns. As we will discuss, close to 60% of those students who began the NAI program are currently in a four-year university. Accordingly, we suggest that a program based on what we will call “cultural integrity” has significant implications for increasing access to postsecondary education for those students who are most “at risk” of otherwise not being able to gain access to a college education.

### *Models of College Preparation Programs*

We define college preparation programs as enhancement programs aimed at increasing access to college for low-income youths who attend public schools. The programs take place during an individual’s middle school and/or high-school years and are classes or activities that occur in addition to the regular school day. Frequently, the programs involve relationships between schools and postsecondary institutions. Over the last three years we have developed a preliminary way of categorizing programs with regard to program characteristics and instructional processes (see Appendix A). Our purpose has been to try to make objective sense of the myriad of programs that currently exist. First we offer three of the most common approaches that are targeted to specific clienteles and then turn to an elaborated discussion about the fourth program.

*Test preparation.* The goal here is relatively straightforward and has been most widely employed in California. The approach reflects the concern of a public system of higher education for maintaining access in a post-affirmative action era. When the University of California (UC) Regents banned affirmative action, there was a dramatic drop in the enrollment of African American and Hispanic students. Many assert that the central cause for the drop off was that African American and His-

panic youths did not test as well as their Caucasian and Asian American counterparts on the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT). Even though many African American and Hispanic students had scored well enough to gain entrance to a UC campus, on average they scored lower than Caucasian and Asian American students. Due to the lack of spaces in the UC system, there was a concomitant drop in African American and Hispanic enrollment.

One response to this drop has been to focus on those students who will not gain entrance to higher education solely because of their test-taking capability. Some institutions have formed relationships with test-taking companies (e.g., Stanley Kaplan). A particular university, for example, might target a handful of high schools where students of color are likely to attend. A simple comparison between pre- and post-affirmative action will identify the number of students who might have gone to a UC campus if they had scored higher on the SAT. The university then creates a modified course akin to what countless other students in the United States take that will focus exclusively on their preparation for an exam. This kind of program is geared toward students who are likely to attend college but need to improve their SAT scores. The outcome is that those students who take this program will be more likely to go to a more prestigious institution than if they had not taken the program. Because the approach is relatively new, there is little data on whether these students are more likely to graduate from college, but it can show demonstrable gains in attendance at more selective institutions.

*Science and math preparation.* Perhaps the most pervasive of college preparation programs pertain not so much to getting students ready for college but, instead, preparing them for majors in math and science. Programs such as MESA or AISES are exemplars of these kinds of approaches. Such programs, which are often found on college campuses, reflect a second kind of involvement of postsecondary institutions with the issue of access. People of color are historically underrepresented in math and science fields at all levels—as undergraduate majors, as graduate students, and as faculty. In response, federal agencies such as the National Science Foundation and NASA, private foundations such as the Ford Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts, as well as state governments, have responded by creating specific programs that try to generate interest and confidence in the sciences and mathematics on the part of minority students.

As with the test preparation approach, the programs in this category are generally for students who are likely to attend college. These programs do not so much aim at attendance at a more selective or prestigious institution, but instead move students from one kind of major to

another. Thus, indicators of success for these programs are particularly problematic. The students who take such classes would likely have attended college even without the program, and because the programs focus on an area of inquiry rather than completion, one cannot safely assume that the program itself is the primary ingredient in college completion. Nevertheless, the results of these programs often show evidence that its participants do major in the sciences.

*Counseling and academic foci.* A third approach for a college preparation program might best be described as one that focuses intensively on counseling and academic skills. Students receive guidance in various ways. Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) is one example of such a program that has shown success. Although such programs frequently involve colleges and universities in their activities, the bulk of responsibility for running the program is with a local high school.

AVID students are chosen for the program by their high-school teachers or counselors. They take one extra class a day in their school, taught by one of the teachers of the school they attend. The class has at least two explicit functions: one objective is teaching students basic skills, such as how to take notes, how to study, and how to complete various homework assignments; a second objective is assisting students in navigating the college application process—from preparing for exams to submitting application materials, visiting college campuses, and ensuring that the courses taken in high school are aimed at a college career rather than a vocational one.

In many respects, programs such as AVID assume a role that has been dramatically reduced in inner-city schools due to fiscal shortfalls—that of the guidance counselor. AVID instructors focus on the importance of college and how one can get there. An AVID classroom is replete with college-going materials and motivational signs and slogans about college. In short, the instructor takes an individual interest in each student in his or her care and tries to create the conditions that will enable the students to go to college.

Unlike the first two types of college preparation programs, the counseling and academic approaches are geared to a panoply of students—some of whom might otherwise not go to a four-year institution. The background of most students who participate in such programs are frequently youths whose parents have not attended a postsecondary institution and who are frequently in schools that have a relatively low college attendance rate. The participants in these programs demonstrate a higher average of college participation than comparison groups within the same school and the school district (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996), and the majority of these students attend public, comprehensive universities.

Each model offers particular strengths and demonstrates the relationship of different programs to different constituencies. AVID would not work for some of its clientele if nothing were done other than offering a Saturday morning preparation class for the SAT. Conversely, well-prepared students who ended up in a college science preparation program would probably find the activities that take place in an AVID classroom unnecessary. In many respects, such students are already “untracked,” and enrichment programs or SAT preparation classes sharpen their focus or improve skills that they already have.

What the majority of models frequently do not offer, however, is a consideration of how the background and culture of the child enters into college preparation. Indeed, in many respects, the culture of the adolescents seems irrelevant in programs that emphasize test taking or counseling. Skills and knowledge are stressed in a monocultural framework. We raise this point not as a criticism but as an observation; obviously, for the constituencies they serve, such an approach appears to work. However, as noted earlier, such an approach will not work for all youths. For most youths who are in the mainstream, or close to it, schooling involves neither personal redefinitions of identity, nor the explicit or implicit rejection of one’s cultural worth. However, for those who are on the margins, oftentimes success in school gets equated with rejecting one’s identity and background (Deyhle, 1995; Tierney, 1989). Accordingly, we turn to a fourth approach that employs the idea of cultural integrity as the central scaffolding upon which to build a college preparation program specifically for youths who otherwise would not go on to college.

### *Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks*

*College preparation as cultural integrity.* The theoretical framework we work from here holds two central ideas about education. The first pertains to the concept of culture. Education in culture is not a simple process of teaching neutral facts and figures to a faceless population; it is an interactive process of individual identity development and the creation of community. As McDermott and Varenne nicely summarize:

Life in culture . . . is polyphonous and multivocalic; it is made of the voices of many, each one brought to life and made significant by the others. . . . Culture is not so much a product of sharing as a product of people hammering each other into shape with the well-structured tools already available. (1995, p. 326)

Education is one of those tools, and more often than not, it has enabled some and disabled others. A college preparation program that merely

seeks to teach facts and figures to a group of disembodied youths may well convey how to master a specific task, but it leaves unquestioned and in place the cultural processes that advantage some and disadvantage others. As suggested above, such processes may be most helpful for those individuals who already are in the “pipeline” and simply need a specific skill to continue. However, we suggest that the teaching of skills, however necessary, is insufficient for students who have been previously labeled “at-risk” and are at the educational margins of society for whatever reason.

Such work might involve instilling in students the *cultural capital* necessary for success. The notion of cultural capital, according to Bourdieu (1977a), is based on the assumption that cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities are possessed and often inherited by certain groups in society. Distinctive cultural knowledge is transmitted through the families of each social class. As a consequence, children of upper-class families inherit substantially different skills, abilities, manners, styles of interaction, and facility with language (Bourdieu, 1977b). Cultural capital, then, refers to the sets of linguistic and cultural competencies individuals inherit because of their class, racial, and gender identities.

Families with higher amounts of cultural capital have clearer strategies of how much and what kind of schooling each generation should hold. A student’s disposition toward school is important, because in order for one to maximize cultural capital, one must be willing to consent to the investments in time, effort, and money that higher education requires. One way that working-class and minority youths might enjoy the same advantages as their more affluent and privileged peers is for educators to act in a manner that generates a socialization process that produces the same sorts of strategies and resources employed in privileged homes and institutions. In terms of cultural capital, college preparation programs connect students to social networks and try to develop the cultural capital that it takes to survive in what many working-class youths perceive as an alien environment—college campuses—or it might focus on psychological and emotional support structures for adolescents who do not have an adult in their lives who has gone to college or who understands how to go about getting into college. The focus, we are suggesting here, however, is not on a simple-minded assimilation of upper-class or monochromatic processes and styles by those who differ from the norm. Rather, the goal is to enable individuals to affirm their culture en route to acquiring the cultural capital necessary to succeed in college.

If culture is a central organizing framework, then the second idea pertains to the manner in which students, teachers, families, and administrators work together. When education is seen as a tool that can be used



for or against children, then of necessity one must bring into question the roles different groups have in the process. As Cummins notes, previous attempts at educational reform have been unsuccessful, because “the relationships between teachers and students and between schools and communities have remained essentially unchanged. The required changes involve *personal redefinitions* of the way classroom teachers interact with the children and communities they serve” (1986, p. 18). As we elaborate below, such redefinitions hinge on the idea that the elaboration and affirmation of the cultural backgrounds of those whom we teach are essential for developing successful strategies for college preparation programs. To be sure, students need to learn skills, but in order for learning to take place for those most on the margins we are suggesting that we should work from the idea of cultural integrity.

As Deyhle (1995) has discussed in a decade-long ethnographic study with Navajo youths, students who are more secure in their traditional culture are more academically successful in school. The school success of these Navajo students, with strong traditions intact, is explained by what she defined as a model of cultural integrity. By refusing to accept either assimilation or rejection, these students remained academically successful while maintaining their place as Navajos within the community.

We define cultural integrity as those programs and teaching strategies that call upon students’ racial and ethnic backgrounds in a positive manner in the development of their pedagogies and learning activities. Cultural integrity removes the problem from the child and looks on the child’s background neither as a neutral nor a negative factor for learning. Instead, the adolescent’s cultural background is a critical ingredient for acquiring cultural capital and achieving success.

*Method.* We employed a qualitative methodology that involved interviews, focus groups, observations, and life histories. The data derive from a two-fold process that took place over three years. In the first year of the study we developed a taxonomic framework for thinking about ways to categorize college preparation programs (see Appendix A). In the ensuing two years we followed up by way of ethnographic interviews, focus groups, observations, document analysis, and life histories of students in programs that fell within different categories of the taxonomy. We were particularly interested in programs that focused on youths who might not have gone to college if they had not participated in a college preparation program. Thus, more emphasis was placed on programs, for example, that had a counseling focus than on the ones that assumed the students would go to college but needed extra math preparation.



The last two years of our two-fold research process, we focused specifically on one of these programs, the Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI). We spent two years interviewing students, counselors, teachers, and administrators of this program. The total number of individuals interviewed was over fifty; everyone was interviewed for more than one hour. Five students participated in a life history process that accounted for approximately 40 hours per person (Jun, 2000). We observed classroom activities, out-of-class events, and family workshops on Saturdays. Observations accounted for about 50 hours of fieldwork. We then sifted through the interviews of this particular program to try to make theoretical sense of what had taken place and developed the approach outlined above.

### *The Neighborhood Academic Initiative*

*Background.* The Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI) is a program that began in 1990. Every year NAI admits approximately 40 students in the seventh grade that will stay in the program until they graduate from high school. Students come from neighborhoods in Los Angeles with historically low representation in postsecondary institutions. The overwhelming majority of youths are either African American or Hispanic; a significant percentage is first generation citizens or immigrants from Latin America whose parents do not yet have their citizenship. Students are chosen for the program based on two criteria: their stated willingness to learn and a parent or guardian's willingness to support the "scholar." The student does not need to be an "A" student or perceived to be "college material"; indeed, most participants are considered "B" or "C" students. Given previous schooling, many read at or below grade level. Virtually all of the students fit within the framework of what previous studies have defined as at "high-risk" of dropping out of school and not going on to college (Horn & Chen, 1998).

None of the students is chosen because of extraordinary motivation or high grade point averages. Students and their families need to express a willingness to participate in the program, but the interview process is neither lengthy nor exclusionary. The intent is to recruit average students who have a desire to learn.

The students attend classes every day for two hours prior to the start of school at the University of Southern California (USC). The instructors are hired by NAI, but come from local area high schools. The subjects taught are English and math. Students also attend a "Saturday Enrichment Academy," where the classes deal with topics such as computer literacy, socio-emotional issues, study skills, and the like. Students take

extra courses during the summer. Parents or guardians attend approximately six Saturday morning sessions every semester that pertain to a variety of familial issues and responsibilities relating to college. Participants have referred to NAI as a “loving boot camp” (Tierney, 2000) that works within a highly disciplined environment.

A central component of NAI pertains to counseling in ways that go beyond what programs such as AVID do. As with AVID, teachers and staff focus on the ins and outs of college applications, tests, and other preparatory information. However, what NAI intends as guidance has more to do with enabling students to come to grips with the myriad of social and emotional problems that confront all adolescents. These problems develop and get played out in localized, cultural contexts. A central assumption of NAI is that if students are going to be able to learn, then the program’s teachers must deal proactively with such problems. Counselors and administrators attempt to address what Maeroff (1998) refers to as the “four senses” (a sense of connectedness, well-being, academic initiative, and a sense of knowing). Maeroff suggests that these four characteristics are the essential factors for building cultural capital for low-income urban schoolchildren. Teachers and staff frequently come from the local community and are trained in areas that go well beyond traditional teaching strategies; they have an understanding of the specific challenges faced by adolescents who come from the local neighborhoods.

Students begin the program in seventh grade and are supposed to stay with NAI until their graduation in the twelfth grade. The incentive for success in the program is enticing; if they apply to USC and gain acceptance, the university will pay for their tuition. As of fall 2000, four cohorts have graduated from NAI. Of the 40 original NAI students who began the program as seventh-graders in 1991, approximately 33% left the program between seventh and twelfth grade (see Appendix B). Such an attrition rate is well below the local school district average, and the majority of students return to school rather than leave school altogether. The remaining 27 students (67%) persisted in the program and graduated from high school. Over 60% of those 27 graduates were admitted to a four-year university (see Appendix C). The numbers are similar for subsequent classes. In 1998, for example, of an entering class of 50 seventh-grade students, 31 (62%) persisted and ultimately graduated from the program. Moreover, 61% of the graduates in 1998 were admitted and certified to attend a four-year institution, a number well above national and local averages (see Appendix C). On a national level, the college-going rate for high-school students is approximately 40% (Mehan, et al., 1996, p. 43), and on a local level the schools from which these students

come is below 20% (Colvin & Sahagun, 1998). For students who come from neighborhoods where college participation is low, especially at the four-year level, such college-going rates are quite remarkable.

*Cultural integrity as an organizing framework for NAI.* We do not suggest that all college preparation programs should mimic the activities we will discuss below. Indeed, the findings presented here are preliminary; such a small sample defies generalization. However, at a time when the need for postsecondary education has risen, NAI stands out as a model to consider for those of us who are particularly concerned about low-income minority adolescents in the inner city, where entrance to four-year colleges is among the lowest of all groups in the nation. There are five key components of the program to be considered that derive from the data. As we show in the following sections, the data point to a model based on cultural integrity where local contexts and definitions about life are constantly used as the scaffolding for the program.

By using the framework of cultural integrity, we extend Cummins's notion that power is "not a fixed, predetermined quantity but rather can be generated in interpersonal and inter-group relations. . . . Participants are empowered through their collaboration such that each is more affirmed in his or her identity" (1997, p. 424). From this perspective, academic success hinges on the ability of a program such as NAI to meet students' localized needs by affirming the cultural contexts in which they exist, rather than ignoring or rejecting them. Thus, the framework operates from the belief that educators' notions of student identities, the roles that teachers assume, and the structures in which teaching and learning exist go a long way in enabling or disabling the college intentions of low-income urban minority youth. As we will discuss, one irony of NAI is that a program that concentrates intensively on academic skill preparation actually has as its scaffolding the tenet that learning is not difficult, that everyone can do it, and that access to, and success in, college is a function of the interplay of individual determination and community support. Thus, unlike radically individualist notions of ideas such as "hard work" or "success," NAI's program is encoded within a framework that assumes that the culture of each child is a critical factor for success.

*Affirming identity.* The title of NAI is purposive—the "neighborhood" academic initiative. The program assumes that academic success is tied to the student's ability to relate to his or her local neighborhood contexts. Some college preparation programs work from the opposite assumption. In an area where significant social problems such as drug use, crime, and unemployment exist, one might be tempted to remove adolescents from local contexts with the expectation that, at best, such an environment had nothing to offer and that, at worst, it was an impedi-

ment to learning. Similarly, parents or guardians who had no knowledge of college life might be viewed as either irrelevant or harmful to the learning process. Indeed, the label of “at-risk” for such students, however benign or well intentioned, actually affirms that the social and familial environments where these children live are dangerous and harmful—risky—for their social and intellectual health.

NAI, however, assumes that learning cannot occur as effectively if educators consciously ignore or merely overlook families and neighborhoods. Schooling is linked, not separate from, the out-of-school contexts in which children live. Accordingly, parents or guardians are a central component of the learning experience. If adults do not have the skills to help their children learn, then the Saturday Academy will train them in how to facilitate learning. “My mother is so proud,” said one tenth grader, “that she acts like I am already in college. She likes to show off, like I’m making it.” Another student commented, “They tell our parents to let us do our homework, to make sure it gets done, and my father is constantly after me. You’d think it’s the most important thing in the world, getting some homework assignment done.”

The director of NAI explained, “Parents usually see schools and teachers as alien. If their child gets a poor grade, either they give up or get on the teacher’s case. Our job is to point out that the teacher is on their child’s side. We’re all in this together.” The result is that students work their way through their school years with an affirmation of learning in the contexts in which they exist. At a time when the inner city is most often portrayed as crime-ridden and drug-infested, NAI affirms local contexts and enables adolescents to develop positive conceptions of their neighborhood rather than assume that to succeed in education they must change who they are. Local role models speak to the students and their families. Older students help younger students “learn the ropes.” The entire educational experience works to confirm a child’s conception of him or her self and the neighborhood in which he or she lives.

*Students as scholars.* As soon as students enter the seventh grade they are referred to as “scholars.” The program enforces a rigorous discipline where all aspects of the pedagogic process are geared toward learning. If a student arrives late to class, for example, the youth will say some variation of, “I’m sorry scholars for disrupting the class.” The point with such a statement is not that the student needs to apologize to a teacher or an abstract principle, but rather that he or she has slowed the learning process for his or her classmates. Teachers, counselors and staff constantly refer to the students as “scholars.” The portrait one leaves with is that of high expectations—these children are “scholars.”

Such a simple word accurately conveys the climate of NAI. McLaugh-

lin has noted that “the majority of youth-serving programs view youth as a problem and try to fix, remedy, control or prevent some sort of behavior” (1993, p. 59). NAI is the opposite. Young people are viewed as highly talented individuals who have the possibility of achieving whatever they want to achieve. Although graduation from high school or attendance at a community college is not disdained, goals are set as high as the child can possibly reach. “I want to be a doctor,” said one twelfth grader in a focus group. Another added, “First I want to graduate and get my master’s and work for a while. Then I’ll get my doctorate.” A third said, “I’m going into politics to change things. I’ll get a law degree. That’s the route.” One might equate such comments with idle conjecture on the part of high-school students, except that such comments are not the norm for youths that others have labeled “at-risk.” And again, these students are not individuals who expressed such aspirations before their involvement with NAI.

Although students were disciplined throughout their program, such discipline existed within a positive framework. When a student got into trouble, he or she would be placed on “early warning.” Virtually everyone found him- or herself on early warning at some point during his or her career. “Shoot, we’re just kids. Sure we get into trouble,” explained one of the students, “but it’s not so bad. I mean, I know they’re trying to help.” “I went to a concert when I should’ve done my homework so I got in trouble,” added a second student. “You have to pay attention. That’s what they tell us,” summarized a third, and a fourth added, “And we’re supposed to be on the lookout for one another, to make sure we all help one another and don’t mess up.”

A teacher explained the kind of faculty NAI required: “If you don’t want to go the extra mile, to work harder, to make sure that these students are going to make it and to believe in them, then this program isn’t for you.” Another teacher pointed out the drawbacks: “I don’t have my own classroom in my home school because I’m here in the morning. I grade more quizzes here, too. It’s worth it to watch the scholars learn.” A third added, “Teachers here have to work as a team; if you’re not into that, and just want to come in and do your thing, NAI won’t work for you.” The acceptance of who these students were, where they came from, the challenges they faced, and the constant reinforcement that they were “scholars” created a positive image for the students that helped foster learning.

*Reaching for high, attainable goals.* NAI accepts that an institutional hierarchy exists within academe, where research universities are at the top of the pyramid and community colleges are further down. One need only glance at college-going patterns of minority youth to realize that a

disproportionate number of students are tracked into community colleges, and very few end up in elite four-year institutions. Indeed, as previous scholars have noted, a tracking system exists throughout one's educational career that provides opportunities for some and not for others (Oakes, 1985). NAI's staff seeks to disrupt the tracking process from the outset by pointing out to the adolescents that all options are open and available to them and that most of them are expected to go to a four-year institution such as USC or UCLA. In an environment where others lower expectations, NAI's challenge is to do the opposite. As Mehan et al. note, "Untracking stands in stark contrast to prevailing educational policy concerning the education of students" (1996, p. 3). We know, for example, that historically students from low-income schools have received different curricula, different pedagogical methods, and different assumptions about learning than their counterparts in upper-class schools. The results have been that some students learned intellectually and implicitly that they were good enough to be in a trade school but not a university. They learned how to be plumbers, mechanics, or draftspersons rather than architects, engineers, or lawyers.

Students from low-income schools typically either believe that research universities are unattainable because of fiscal, academic, and social barriers, or they never even consider such an option. NAI's program takes place on a college campus for six years in large part so that students feel they belong and also get a sense of what going to college means. The entire emphasis of the program is that elite institutions such as USC belong as much to children from south central as they do for youths from Beverly Hills or Scarsdale.

The financial support that USC offers students who graduate from high school and are accepted to the university also provides an economic incentive for the students; and yet, in interviews with the scholars no one was able to say how much college cost. The younger the students, the less able they were to come even close to guessing the cost of tuition at a private research university. "A lot, maybe a couple thousand dollars," was a comment one student made and several of her friends nodded in agreement. The point here is that children frequently do not have an accurate sense of what technical concepts like tuition, financial aid, loans, or scholarships actually mean. Rich children do not calculate costs because their families can pay for them; poor children do not calculate costs because they know such an exercise is futile. What NAI has done, however, is remove the perception that college cost is a barrier to post-secondary education. What students and parents know is that if the students work as hard as they can and do well, then they will be rewarded with admittance to college regardless of their income.

Similarly, the Saturday enrichment classes and other events scattered throughout the year are geared toward providing skills most commonly associated with the idea of “cultural capital.” Students take trips to museums, see plays, acquire computer skills, and learn how to deal with faculty and adults in ways that might be different from the environment in which they live. One student, for example, wryly explained, “They teach us to how to answer the phone, stuff like that. Like we’re not supposed to say, “Hey pookie, how’s it hanging,” when we pick up the phone. Another said, “I like going to plays with the class; it’s not something I was used to before.” A third pointed out, “I’m not very good in math and the extra classes help me concentrate.”

Thus, the climate throughout a scholar’s career is one that is geared toward academic success at the highest level—as defined by traditional academic standards. To be sure, if a student is not able to achieve the grades necessary for admission to an elite institution, or the individual decides that college is not desirable for one reason or another, they are certainly supported. However, the academic universe of students in NAI is expansive rather than restrictive.

*Breaking the stereotype of culture.* Whereas the first point focused on the affirmation of identity, this section considers the larger affirmation of one’s culture. Claude Steele, among others, has noted how stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. “The event of a negative stereotype about a group to which one belongs,” explains Steele, “becomes self-relevant, usually as a plausible interpretation for something one is doing” (1997, p. 616). Thus, when a black student does poorly on an exam the student fits within what is expected of him or her based on racial background. Indeed, most often, even before that student says or does anything in a classroom, a stereotype threat exists. As McDermott and Varenne have noted, “Cultures can use established cultural forms to disable each other” (1995, p. 332). We have, then, powerful educational cultures populated by actors, however well-meaning, which define individuals in culturally specific ways that aim to dis-able and ultimately discard different student groups. Within such cultures, students become stereotyped based on disabling notions of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and the like. In turn, students incorporate negative notions of self so that they are faced with one of two options—either accept who they are and believe that fewer, rather than more, options exist for life once they graduate from high school, or reject their background and try to be like the majority.

The path of “disidentification” (Steele, 1997, p. 614) is fraught with confusion. The reconceptualization of one’s self and one’s values suggests that one must reject family, neighborhood and one’s friends if one



is to succeed in the academic sphere. However, one way to enact the point made above—expanding academic options for low-income minority students—has been to ensure that racial stereotypes are broken by having students act in ways assumed to be successful and most often identified with the Anglo majority. The establishment of boarding schools for Native American students is perhaps the most pernicious example of the desire to wipe out the culture of the individual student that has existed in American education. The problem with such an approach is not only that a student must deny his or her cultural background, but that it also has had little demonstrable success. Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools, for example, have never succeeded at dramatically improving college-going rates for American Indian youths.

NAI has worked from the opposite assumption. The program accentuates the backgrounds of the youths. The emphasis on high standards assumes that these individuals, from these neighborhoods and these families, will do as well as anyone else. When students face social obstacles or academic hurdles, they have the support structures in place that enable them to succeed; rather than a climate that assumes that such problems are “typical” and the student is left to deal with it on his or her own, the scholar has a support structure that seeks to ensure that he or she stays on track.

At the same time, values clarification is a constant theme stressed throughout the academic career of the scholars. The harmful consequences of drugs, how one should respond to violence at home or in the neighborhood, and a host of other problems that adolescents must deal with are faced on an ongoing basis by the teachers and staff. The “scholar’s code of ethics” is a document that every individual has in his or her notebook, and it is explicitly and implicitly discussed. Cheating is pointed out as wrong; teamwork is accentuated. The rigor of the program is stressed as the path to success, and teachers and counselors are thought of as supporters rather than as enemies. Such a code helps build a scholar’s sense of competence and self-efficacy, but in doing so, the individual does not need to reject her or his heritage. Indeed, all NAI materials, such as the “code of ethics,” are written in English and Spanish so that every scholar’s parents might be able to read about the program. In this light, NAI exemplifies what Cummins speaks about with regard to positive relations of power and the creation of educational processes and structures:

Educational structures, together with educator role definitions, influence the micro intentions between educators, students and communities. These micro intentions form an interpersonal or an interactional space within which the acquisition of knowledge and formation of identity is negotiated. Power is

created and shared within this interpersonal space where minds and identities meet. As such, the micro intentions constitute the most immediate determinant of student academic success or failure. (1997, p. 425)

*Learning about learning.* One of the more surprising comments that the students made in their focus groups and individual interviews was their response to the question: “What does it take to succeed in NAI”? One might assume that in a program that is looked on as academically rigorous an answer might be that the individuals need to be talented. Such a response might be particularly tempting for someone in the program, for in making the statement, the individual is indirectly saying that he or she is academically superior. However, no one made such a statement.

Instead, we heard one student comment, “Anyone can do the work. You just have to focus.” A second confirmed, “Shoot. It’s not difficult. Well it is because it’s time consuming and you can’t mess around, but it’s not like you need to be a genius or something.” A tenth grader commented, “I thought it was going to be hard, and it is. But anybody can do the work.” A twelfth grader looked back on those students who had dropped out and observed, “No one left because the program was too difficult, they couldn’t do the work. They left because of personal problems or they weren’t motivated.” Another twelfth grader summarized, “You have the opportunity to learn. It’s not that we’re special. We just worked the way we’re supposed to work and everybody helped out.”

When asked what they thought made for a good teacher, the scholars commented: “He needs to expect a lot from us, make us do stuff.” Another said, “Class should be fun, do fun stuff, not make it boring because we want to learn.” A third explained, “They need to realize we’re just kids. We’re gonna make mistakes, mess up. But that doesn’t mean let us get away with anything, or accept, like, us being lazy, or accept a lot of crappy work.” A fourth summarized, “It’s good if they’re dedicated, if they’ll spend a lot of time with us.”

Such comments outline the basic premise of the program. High standards, achievement, and success in NAI are not abstractions that require innate intelligence or the rejection of one’s cultural background. Instead, any individual can learn if the conditions permit the student to do so. Implicitly, what students learn in such an environment is that they also will be able to do college level work—at any institution—because they have learned the skills necessary to learn.

As others (Noguera, 1996, p. 231) have noted, students want high expectations from their teachers. Firmness, compassion, creativity, and dedication were pointed out as attributes of a good teacher. At a time when there is a consistent media portrayal of inner city students as gang

bangers who see their role as baiting teachers, NAI's scholars offered a dramatically different portrait of what they wanted from schooling.

### *Conclusion*

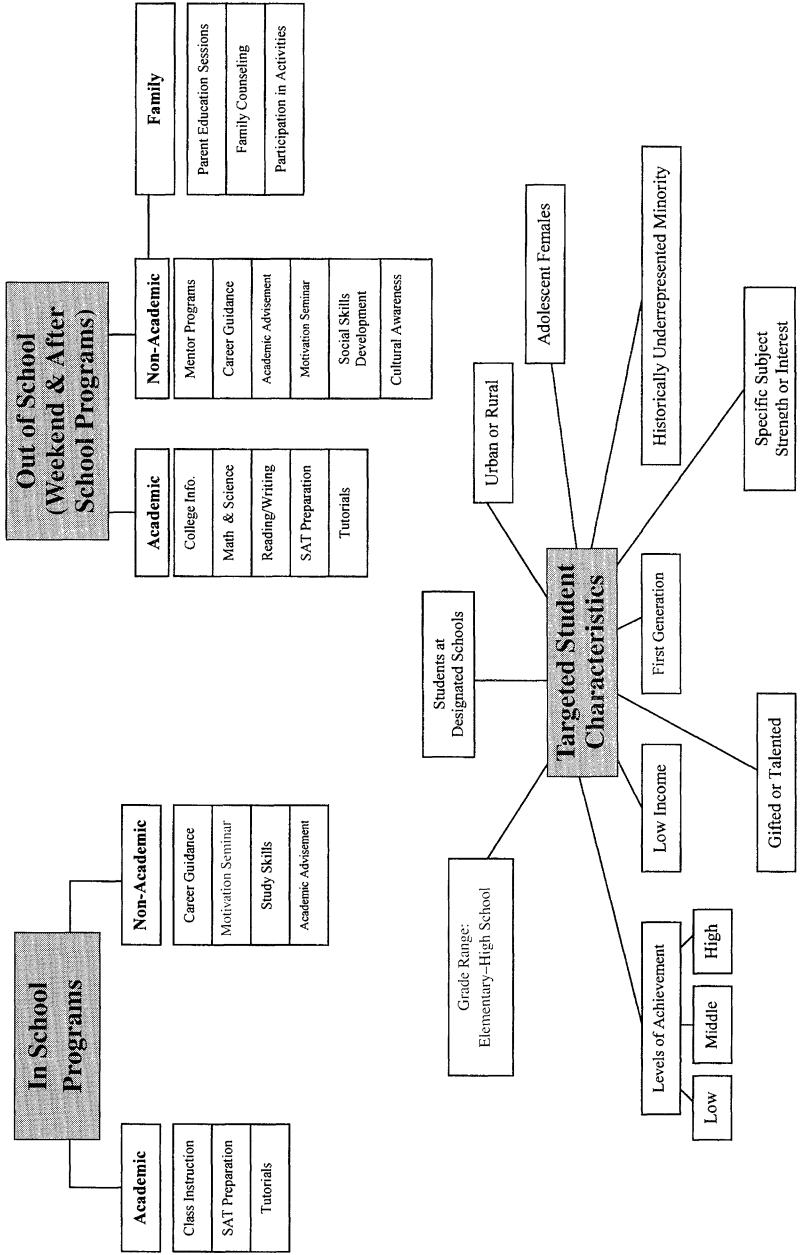
We have outlined the elements of a college preparation program that works from a quite different framework than most such projects. As we noted, multiple programs reach out to different audiences in manifold ways. Although we surely do not seek to denigrate any attempt at improving access for all underrepresented groups, we are most concerned with programs aimed at those most unlikely to go to college—low-income, urban, minority youths who are “average” students. To be sure, the chosen few who have above average intelligence—as defined by traditional measures—also need support structures, and a better job can be done at all levels of college preparation. However, the children who are most “at-risk” are those who come from low-income inner city families without a college education, children who attend public school and who are not in the academic mainstream.

We also need to caution about the “success” of programs such as the Neighborhood Academic Initiative. NAI is successful at untracking the scholars who participate. Over 60% of those who started the program in the seventh grade graduated from high school; of those who graduated, over 60% went to a four-year research university, and over 90% went on to some form of postsecondary institution. Such numbers are significantly above local and national averages for similar comparison groups. In this light, NAI is remarkably successful at untracking students and enabling them to achieve in ways that many programs cannot.

But we must also note that, as with the vast majority of college preparation programs, NAI is additive to regular school practices. If society is to create significant change in public schooling, more must occur than “untracking” the lucky few; instead, the broad public needs to encourage legislators and educators to restructure a system that now tracks some toward one walk of life and others toward less prestigious venues based largely on an individual's race, gender, and identity. As McDermott and Goldman note, such a program, “leaves intact the sorting system it teaches students to overcome. A more direct assault would confront the very idea of success and failure, the very idea of sorting” (1998, p. 126). However much in sympathy we are with an attempt to overhaul an inequitable schooling structure, we also are disenchanted with utopian calls for new federal or state dollars that are not likely to come or with disengaged theoretical discussions about empowerment that do not link theoretical concepts to practice. Today's students need help today.

What the Neighborhood Academic Initiative demonstrates is that urban minority youths are fully capable of academic excellence, and such achievement is not based on individual genius but on the structures of schooling and the nature of the relationship between schools and postsecondary institutions. Further, such structures are not dependent on stripping away the residue of culture, as if that were ever possible. Instead, the approach works from a framework that assumes the centrality of culture. As Cummins nicely summarizes, “The framework implies that in social contexts characterized by historical and current coercive relations of power, educator-student micro intentions must explicitly challenge the coercive power structure operating in the broader society as a necessary condition for students to succeed academically” (1997, p. 425). Thus, the success of the program hinges on the relationships and structures that NAI builds across multiple constituencies—families, neighborhoods, educators, and of course, the scholars. Identities are affirmed within a larger affirmation of neighborhoods and cultures. Youths are seen as talented individuals who can achieve whatever they desire.

The challenge of success is fourfold. The individual scholar must accept responsibility for his or her learning and strive to achieve. The scholar’s parent or guardian must demonstrate a willingness to help and a willingness to learn how to help. The teachers and counselors must create the conditions for learning by emphasizing excellence, fostering high goals, and affirming the background of every youth. And finally, the university must provide the fiscal incentives and infrastructure to enable the program to thrive. Ultimately, what is remarkable about NAI is not only that the scholars graduate, but that they admit they are not remarkable: “If I can do it,” commented one student, “shoot, anybody can, because I was a pretty sorry student when I started—and look at me now. I’m going to college.”



APPENDIX B

NAI Retention Data (1997–2004)

High-School Graduating Class	Total # of Students in Class	Total # of Students Who Withdrew from Program (Percentages)	Total # of Students Retained (Percentages)
1997 (By cohort entering in 1991)	40	13 (33%)	27 (67%)
1998 (By cohort entering in 1992)	50	19 (38%)	31 (62%)
1999 (By cohort entering in 1993) <sup>a</sup>	28	13 (46%)	15 (54%)
2000 (By cohort entering in 1994)	63	28 (44%)	35 (56%)
2001 (By cohort entering in 1995) <sup>b</sup>	32	14 (44%)	18 (56%)
2002 (By cohort entering in 1996)	44	8 (19%)	36 (81%)
2003 (By cohort entering in 1997)	50	12 (24%)	38 (76%)
2004 (By cohort entering in 1998)	70	10 (15%)	60 (85%)

<sup>a</sup>No students were recruited as 7th graders in 1993, and the “original cohort” was consequently recruited in 8th grade & 11th grade.

<sup>b</sup>No students were recruited as 7th graders in 1995, and the “original cohort” was consequently recruited in 8th and 9th grade.

APPENDIX C

College Paths of NAI Graduates by Class

Class of	Total # of High-School Graduates	Entered USC	UC System	CSU System	Community College	Other Four-Year College	Vocational College	Other
1997 (N = 40)	27 (68%)	13 (33%)	0	1 (2%)	12 (30%)	0	0	1 (2%)
1998 (N = 50)	31 (62%)	17 (34%)	1 (2%)	2 (4%)	9 (18%)	1 (2%)	0	1 (2%)
1999 (N = 28)	15 (54%)	8 (29%)	0	2 (7%)	2 (7%)	3 (11%)	0	0
2000 (N = 63)	39 (62%)	7 (11%)	10 (16%)	9 (14%)	10 (16%)	2 (3%)	0	1 (1%)

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