



PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Pathways to Postsecondary Success: Maximizing Opportunities for Youth in Poverty

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In the United States, there are approximately 16.3 million low-income youth between the ages of 16 to 26 (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2009). A disproportionate number of these youth are African American, Latina/o, and/or living in households headed by single women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). While there is a long-standing public recognition that our nation's future prosperity depends on investing in our youth, many U.S. children continue to lack access to high-quality, well-resourced schooling opportunities. This lack of equal opportunity ties youth in poverty to low-wage jobs or creates situations where they are "disconnected" from both school and work opportunities.

As part of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's United States Special Initiative, *Post-Secondary Education Success Plan (PSE+)*, a team of interdisciplinary researchers at University of California/ACCORD is undertaking a five-year (2008-2013), mixed-methods design study focusing on youth in poverty who are not on-track to attain a post-secondary education credential with value in the labor market.

Objectives

The *Pathways to Postsecondary Success* project seeks to understand what knowledge and tools are needed to maximize postsecondary opportunities for low-income youth. In order to bring a range of different lenses to the problems under study, the project was purposefully designed to be multi-method and multi-disciplinary. We assembled a research team that brought together individuals from different academic areas including education, sociology, psychology, among others, and with expertise in both quantitative studies of large national survey data and in-depth qualitative studies of youth experiences in schools and communities.

The studies are designed to address the following key research questions:

- What are the educational trajectories of low-income youth as they make their way to and through college?
- In what ways does a postsecondary credential make a difference for low-income youth?
- How do race, gender, immigration, and parental status impact educational and employment opportunities?
- How do youth make meaning of information and resources that aim to promote student success?
- What interactions occur between institutions and youth that support or hinder postsecondary access, persistence, and completion?
- What statistical indicators are needed to monitor postsecondary success for low-income youth?

The study is guided by the premise that it is important to take an asset-based approach to understanding youth in poverty and their communities. Instead of taking a deficit frame, we argue that to truly expand opportunities for success, educational institutions must find a way to build on the strengths that currently exist within youth's families and communities.

Project Activities

Pathways to Postsecondary Success is a set of multi-method studies that provides a holistic portrait of the various supports and barriers low-income youth face during their efforts to access and complete college. Below is a list of our project activities.

1. A conference and journal volume providing a synthesis of existing research on youth in poverty that reveals what is already known and what additional research needs to be done.
2. A national quantitative portrait of the multiple segments of youth in poverty and their trajectories from school to post-secondary education and work that identifies opportunities and obstacles to the attainment of a post-secondary credential.
3. A survey of youth ages 18-26 in California that will document patterns of participation in postsecondary education, employment and civic engagement during the current economic climate.
4. In-depth qualitative portraits of numerous California communities (Los Angeles, San Diego, and Riverside) that illuminate the interactions of the target population and PSE opportunities and obstacles where they live. These case studies focus on transitions out of high school and into community college and workforce development programs. Studying the students' lives in this deep qualitative way will help inform interventions to support their success in the future.
5. An important outcome of the *Pathways to Postsecondary Success* project is the development of a comprehensive statistical indicator system. The system will produce web-based tools and reports that can be used to inform and monitor postsecondary success. The system will include "status indicators," those that measure demographic participation gaps in postsecondary education -- and "leading indicators" -- those that measure the critical conditions needed to provide postsecondary opportunity. Together these indicators will provide information about whether institutional interventions and policy strategies are stimulating the will and capacity required for postsecondary success.

For more information, please contact:

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