

TRUSTing in the Future: College Access in an Urban School District

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Abstract

An alliance of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, the Birmingham City Schools, the National Urban Alliance, and the College Board is strengthening urban teacher preparation through TRUST—Training and Retaining Urban Student Teachers. At the heart of this effort is an Urban Teacher Enhancement Program that supports teachers in building sociocultural competence, an affirming attitude, collaborative skills, and specific pedagogy to build on diversity in the classroom. In addition, TRUST is working to enhance school counseling so that, in addition to better prepared teachers for urban schools, students will have access to college admissions support.

The popular saying “it takes a village to raise/educate a child” provides the impetus for an initiative known as TRUST—Training and Retaining Urban Student Teachers in Birmingham, Alabama. This comprehensive partnership involves the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), the Birmingham City Schools, the National Urban Alliance, and the College Board in redefining the preparation and retention of teachers for urban schools. Its vision is to coalesce the resources and energy of local and national educators to prepare teachers who will survive and thrive in urban school environments and—through enhanced, high-quality teaching—advance urban student achievement and access to postsecondary education.

TRUST is built on the unshakable belief that quality teachers in urban schools nurture and develop academic achievement and confidence in students. Nowhere is this more important than in the high schools where students receive their final preparation for college. As teacher quality improves, the TRUST partners believe that more students will be prepared to succeed in postsecondary educational settings—ideally at UAB, but also in a wide range of other settings that are possible for prepared graduates. In addition to the TRUST initiative’s focus on intense professional development for teachers, described in more detail in the pages that follow, a complementary focus is on improving counseling for college admissions—also a vital factor in urban student access to college.

TRUST Partner Contributions

The creative energy of the four partner organizations contributes to the impact TRUST is able to have on teacher preparation and student success. TRUST has four key components:

1. Teachers in 14 Birmingham City Schools participate in coordinated, highly focused professional development activities under the leadership of the National Urban Alliance to enhance their capacity to provide high-quality teaching to urban youth. Once a month since 2004, NUA mentors have traveled to Birmingham for a week to provide in-class modeling, small- and large-group demonstrations and

- personal coaching for teachers in the cohort schools.
2. At the middle and high school levels, the College Board provides its SpringBoard program, designed to prepare and encourage all students from grades six through twelve to achieve at high levels. This program fosters the skills needed to succeed in the first year of college. These skills have been identified by the College Board after extensive research and form the basis of their Standards for College Success.
 3. The Urban Teacher Enhancement Program (UTEP) is a collaborative partnership to prepare and retain teachers for urban schools involving UAB faculty and Birmingham City Schools' teachers and administrators.
 4. Retention of UTEP candidates is accomplished through a systemic induction program for new teachers designed and implemented by the Alabama Teacher Training and Induction Network (ATTAIN), a standards-driven beginning teacher induction plan. ATTAIN is a model program within the UAB School of Education whose design was funded by a Community Action Plan grant from the Urban Serving Universities' Urban Educator Corps in 2002.

UTEP's Focus on Quality Teacher Preparation

At the heart of the four TRUST components is the UTEP program. Its strength in preparing high-quality teachers lies in its focus on developing four competency strands developing: (1) sociocultural competence, (2) an affirming attitude, (3) collaborative skills, (4) specific pedagogy to build on diversity in the classroom.

Through coursework and related classroom experiences in strand one, UTEP candidates acquire knowledge about urban learners and their families, enabling them to respond effectively to cultural differences in every aspect of their practice. Strand two, affirming attitude, helps candidates develop a belief in the capacity of urban students to achieve at high levels and to reinforce their ability to support their students' vision to attend college and to persevere once there. Through community-based learning experiences in the third programmatic strand, UTEP candidates develop the collaborative skills necessary for creating effective relationships with a variety of persons and groups, both within the school and in the community. This involves working with parents, social service agencies and other community groups. Finally, the program emphasizes research-based instructional strategies throughout demonstrated to be effective with diverse populations.

The Role of the School Counselor in College Admissions Counseling

As important as well-prepared teachers and ongoing professional development are to providing a learning environment that supports student success and access to postsecondary education, the quality and availability of counseling about college is also critical.

Proper advisement and counseling by adequately trained school counselors is an often-missing component in successfully assisting high school students to explore their postsecondary options, especially high-need students. For these students, attending

college is dependent on a range of factors including college readiness coursework, curricular rigor, the quality of teaching and their school environment. Parent, teacher, and peer expectations affect college attendance in addition to the level of financial need. However, another very important factor is the availability and quality of high school counseling (Gandara and Bial 1999).

Repeated studies have shown that improving postsecondary advising services with qualified school counselors has a considerable impact on college access for low-income, rural, and urban students as well as students of color (Gandara and Bial 1999; Plank and Jordan 2001) School counselors have the opportunity to impact students' aspirations, plans, enrollment choices, and assist with applications for financial aid. Just as important, school counselors play a pivotal role in communicating with parents, many of whom have no experience with higher education or the admissions process. Schools with supportive environments for postsecondary education, including a well-staffed counseling department and supportive parent interaction report significantly higher rates of college enrollment (Hawkins 2003).

The reality, however, is that in many urban, high-poverty schools where college counseling is needed most, it is frequently least available. Counselors are either not available due to funding constraints or their time is spent advising students on a host of developmental issues. When quality counseling is available, African American and Latino students are significantly more likely to have their college plans influenced by their high school counselors and yet they are (a) least likely to have school counselors, (b) most likely to have under-prepared counselors, and (c) most likely to have counselors pulled away from college counseling to work on other counseling tasks (Paul 2002).

The TRUST initiative seeks to address the need for more effective counseling of Birmingham high school students. UTEP faculty and UAB faculty in school counseling are partnering to enhance college advising in the schools and coordinate advising and college admissions communications so that students in the TRUST secondary schools have a visible pathway to college built into their academic programs.

Regular contact between UAB faculty (including counseling faculty) and high school teaching and counseling staffs is enhanced with increased access to UAB admissions staff and to UAB admissions programs designed to inform high school students. Teachers and counselors learn about UAB's application process and potential majors. High school students themselves have opportunities to attend UAB recruiting events and take campus tours. There are planning sessions and targeted professional development activities designed to increase the quality of college advising for all active counselors in Birmingham middle and high schools.

While the counseling initiative is still in its infancy, it is being developed with an ongoing assessment that will enable UAB to gather and study annual college-going data and refine the counseling program as needed. UAB is working with the high school staffs and building a data management system to track achievement scores, admissions applications, scholarship applications and received scholarships. This counseling component is an important addition to the seamless, comprehensive

approach by the TRUST partners to prepare urban teachers and, through them, to help all urban students succeed.

References

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