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College 101: Sharing Experiences and Stories for Transformative Change

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Perspective:

College 101

On a chilly Midwestern evening, I sat in a school gymnasium with my 80-year-old father, munching on popcorn and watching a high school men's varsity basketball game. My husband is a coach and watching his games with my dad provides an opportunity for my dad and me to connect, spend time together, and catch up. As we watched the game, my dad was eager to hear updates on my new position as a Director of Academic Advising at my university, and on progress I was making toward my Ph.D. in Higher Education Leadership. Between explosive dunks accompanied by roaring cheer and applause, shrill whistle-blows, and loud buzzers, I proceeded to tell him about a pre-college program for at-risk high school students that I was administering at my institution – *College 101*. He listened intently and then, without taking his gaze off the game, calmly and poignantly said, “That is the most important thing you are doing.” I was taken aback by his quick assessment putting *College 101* above my recent promotion and my PhD! Yet, I was pleased because I knew he connected with my passion for the program and understood the importance of its mission.

My dad was a teen parent and a high school dropout. He has struggled throughout his life with self-doubt and feelings of not belonging for a variety of reasons. However, he is an extremely intelligent and well-read man who understands the opportunities missed as a



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result of his decision to drop out of school. “Look at these athletes,” he said, referring to the basketball players on the floor, predominately non-White students at a school with lower graduation rates compared to others in the district. “I imagine most of them will go to college. But what about other students who don’t have a strong support system? If your program can help them see college as an option for their future, that’s what it’s all about.” I humbly agreed with him. As a first-generation college graduate who would soon earn a PhD, I knew firsthand the transformative power of education.

Exposing students to higher education, especially those who may not see college as a choice for their future, is an opportunity to plant seeds of self-exploration and discovery. Through education, students can be challenged to come to their own truth about who they are, rather than internalizing false messages they may have received – messages grounded in negative experiences and unfair judgements within the context of an unjust society. Education holds the potential and power to change the trajectory of students’ lives, the future of their families, their communities, and the world. What could

College 101

possibly be more worthy of an investment of time and energy than that!

What is College 101?

College 101 is a pre-college outreach program (PCoP) for at-risk (at risk of dropping out) high school students. Broadly, PCoPs are programs that ...Provide educational opportunities to increase college participation for underserved populations of pre-college students. PCoPs provide a pipeline for higher education opportunities to encourage and foster students who would not traditionally pursue a postsecondary education. Their mission is to increase educational opportunities and college participation for underrepresented students who are traditionally non-college bound (Sheth & Tremblay, 2019).

Students who participate in the one-day College 101 event are invited back each year to continue to build their understanding of the college experience and to motivate them to stay in school.

College 101 was created by Dr. Paul Hernandez, a former “at-risk” student (at risk of dropping out) with no intention of pursuing a college degree. The son of an immigrant single mother, he grew up on the streets of Los Angeles, engulfed in deep poverty and gang culture. Not seeing school as relevant to him or his life, he dropped out. Later, however, he reengaged in education through a community college, and progressed on to earn an associate’s, a bachelor’s and a

doctorate. Motivated by his past experiences, he created College 101 to inspire, motivate and empower students traveling a path similar to his own (Hernandez, 2011). My dad and I heard Dr. Hernandez’s story at a student success conference where Dr. Hernandez was the keynote speaker; his story became a catalyst for transformational growth for me. While I have never experienced poverty, hunger, or gang culture, I related to the underlying emotions embedded in his story about his K-12 experiences and how he felt he did not belong, that his voice did not matter, and how he struggled to believe in himself and his personal, academic, and professional potential.

At this same conference, I also attended a session to learn more about Dr. Hernandez’s pedagogical approach to working with at-risk students using *Real Talk* strategies. Real Talk is a powerful and effective approach to teaching and learning, where faculty and staff, through narrative sharing, seek to connect with their students and to connect course curricula or desired class lessons with what personally matters to their students based on lived experiences (Hernandez, 2015). The pedagogy relates to narrative theory in that it capitalizes on the power of turning one’s experiences into one’s story as an action for positive change and connection (Hagen, 2007, 2018). Connection is further fostered around *universal themes* or common emotions that all humans experience based on each person’s unique life journey, such as joy, fear, disappointment, and love.

College 101

Over the next few years, through a partnership with Dr. Hernandez, I successfully incorporated the Real Talk approach in my work. To inform others about the pedagogy and its effects on my work, I presented workshops for faculty and staff at my university, as well as at K-12 and higher education conferences. My aim was to empower others also striving to improve student success (“Overcoming Gang”, 2015; Robinson, et. al, 2016; Robinson, 2019; Robinson, 2020).

My continued work with Dr. Hernandez eventually led me to learn about College 101. The foundation of College 101 centers around Real Talk strategies as an approach to inspire personally meaningful experiences for program participants, especially for students who have not yet developed a belief that college can connect to their futures in a purposeful way. For many institutions of higher education, ideal college prospects are perceived to be high-achieving high school graduates as measured by strong high school grade point averages (HSGPA) and standardized test scores including the SAT (NACAC, 2016; Tremblay, 2013). A challenge with this perspective is that research shows the SAT may be biased against students from low socio-economic status (SES) and non-White families (Gilroy, 2007). These students may be perceived as less able to succeed, a perspective often grounded in untested assumptions and cultural ignorance (Osher & Kendziora, 2010; Schanfield, et al., 2019). This is what drew me to College 101. I desired to be an influencer of change, to impact the life

stories of at-risk students along their own journey of self-discovery and transformation. After introducing College 101 to a colleague who works in Admissions at my university, and who shared my beliefs about at-risk student potential, we took the idea to the dean of my college who agreed to fund the project.

Development of the Program

With support and funding in place, and after observing College 101 at another university, my colleague and I began to act on our vision and develop the program. The first step was to recruit college students to form a small student executive board (e-board). With guidance from my colleague and me, students on the e-board were tasked with recruiting and training other student volunteers, customizing and delegating program activities and tasks, and managing logistics of the day itself. This is one unique and impactful aspect of College 101 – the fact that it is led by college students. The coming together of students who bring ideas and perspectives based on their own experiences, who steer the planning and execution of the event, rather than the program being run by faculty or staff who at-risk high school students may perceive as authority figures who could not possibly understand them or their lives and experiences, helps position the program for success.

To form the e-board, I recruited students who had successfully completed the *Phoenix Student Success Program*, a retention program

College 101

for college students academically dismissed and readmitted to the university (Robinson, 2016). These students had experienced academic failure, but were, for the most part, on the other side of the struggle, moving forward in good academic standing. Each of them had their own personal story of failure and triumph in relation to education. Other students were recruited from *Intercultural Business Student Association (IBSA)*, a registered student organization created by a former Phoenix Student Success Program participant and College 101 e-board member. IBSA was created and designed to provide a forum for students to discuss issues relevant to their educational experiences, and to connect socially with diverse student populations (“Intercultural Business”, 2016). In total, about 60 college student volunteers were recruited.

Next, all students were trained as College Positive Volunteers (CPVs). CPVs are students trained to work with K-12 youth to ...act as ambassadors of higher education when serving with youth, exposing them to college options, resources and materials to be successful in the college exploration and application process. As a college access program, CPV reflects efforts to increase the college enrollment and success for all students, and especially underrepresented students, by providing them with support and information about college preparation, paying for college, career selection, financial resources, and more (College Positive Volunteerism, 2018).

While the team was being CPV-trained and roles were being established, my colleague and I simultaneously reached out to alternative high schools in the area as well as to high schools in higher-poverty areas in neighboring communities. We met with high school administrators, counselors, and teachers, to educate them about the program and to invite them to schedule a date for the event. Once a high school accepted the invitation to the program and a date was established, the next step was to schedule a promotional visit for the CPVs to visit the high school. The objective of this visit was to pique the interest of the high school students and to invite them to the event. This was done, again, not by staff or faculty talking to them, but by college students sharing their own Real Talks with the hope that the high school students would connect with the CPVs’ stories and would be inspired to attend the event. Students who signed up for the event submitted a field trip consent form, which included a photo release.

The Day Itself

Before the event, my colleague and I guided the CPVs through a dry run of the coming day as we physically walked the campus, event-by-event, paying attention to every minute detail in order to minimize opportunity for things to go wrong, especially during times of transition from one event to another. The difference between a good outcome and great outcome is attention to detail (Swindoll, 2005), and we made sure we were prepared for a great event!

College 101

The day itself began with my colleague and me meeting with the CPVs over breakfast to connect, ease nerves, and answer last-minute questions. Then, before the high school bus arrived, the college *walk-around CPVs* strategically spread out across the seats in the room where the first interactions with the high school students would take place so that the high school students would fill the seats in-between the college students. This set the stage for immediate interactions between the students to help the walk-around CPVs connect with the high school students throughout the day, to forge relationships with them, answer their questions, and keep them engaged.

The bus unloaded the group of apprehensive and guarded high school students and the day began. During the opening session, the CPVs introduced themselves, sharing their names, where they were from, their majors, and academic status (freshmen, sophomore, etc.). Next, I shared my Real Talk of overcoming my own barriers to success, connecting my story to the students through universal themes of disappointment, failure, hope, and triumph. The purpose of opening the event with a Real Talk is to build trust and connection, a concept captured in this familiar quote, "Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." For it to be effective, the opening Real Talk needs to be delivered by someone who can share the story of their own journey in a simple, clear, and straightforward manner. In so doing, the students can connect their own experiences with those of the speaker's. The

speaker's experiences do not have to be the same as the students', since it is the underlying universal themes (disappointment, failure, hope, triumph, etc.) that serve as the basis of the connection between speaker and student. It took time for me to learn how to move my Real Talk from a problem story to one framed in contrast to the problem as a reflection of growth and triumph within a larger sociocultural context. This learned skill provided me a tool of connection that empowered me to move beyond the differences that I perceived to exist between myself and the students, and to reframe those differences as an opportunity to learn and grow from students, reflecting the symbiotic relationship of teaching and learning between student and instructor (Hernandez & Loebick, 2016).

After the opening session, the president of the IBSA shared his Real Talk of growing up as the son of Mexican immigrants who spent his early elementary years moving between Mexico, Florida, and Michigan, where he and his family picked blueberries to survive. He shared that one year picking blueberries as a teenager in Florida, even though he lived just a few miles from Disneyworld, he did not even know it existed. It was at that moment, he shared, that he realized there were two worlds; one where kids were working hard to survive, and one where kids were having the time of their lives. For him, school did not connect to his lived reality. He did not see the purpose of school and attended just enough to be eligible to play soccer. Barely graduating, he went on to college with the

College 101

same poor habits he had developed in high school and, after his first year, he was academically dismissed. He shared what he eventually learned about the importance of education to his future, and how now he was getting ready to graduate with a double major in accounting and finance, and with having won a prestigious internship. This accomplishment, he shared, would change his life and that of his family forever. The high school students were completely engaged. Just as when I first heard Dr. Hernandez, the student's story created a pin-drop moment.

The example of the student's story, as well as others shared throughout the event, offers the perspective that psychological change for at-risk students begins by the sharing of human vulnerability and hope. It is at the intersection of the diversity of the human experience and the universal need for hope that opportunity for empowering at-risk students with encouragement, belief, and the invitation to participate lies, not by sharing information about the accolades of the institution or the steps needed in the admission process. Telling students that they should study, get good grades, and go to college can have unintended consequences of further shaming struggling students by pointing out how different they are from their college-going peers and further

pushing them away from higher education. Connection and trust must be established first. Helping the high school students connect with peers who are just a little further ahead of them as college students, through the sharing of stories of overcoming struggle and challenge, helps at-risk students see that they are not so different. Recognizing the similarities between college students and themselves can help at-risk high school

students to see their future in post-secondary education. After the opening Real Talks, the students' trust was earned and their minds and hearts were opened, ready to receive the information that would contribute to understanding the logistics of navigating the world of higher education.

In terms of empowering students within higher education, College 101 does

not solely focus on recruiting students to attend the hosting institution. Rather, it promotes post-secondary education in general, whether a four-year university, community college, trade school, or certificate program. This approach is another component that makes College 101 unique. It reaches beyond the boundaries of one institution and focuses on the opportunities of post-secondary education in whatever form makes sense for each unique student. To that point, institutions willing to take this



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College 101

approach reflects an approach that is enlightened, compassionate, and insightful – projecting the belief that higher education is a public good and by committing resources to a program that does not solely focus on promoting its own institution. This is difficult in an era of declining enrollment and tightening budgets, and in many ways, reflects the heart of an institution.

The remainder of the day involved a series of experiences aimed at exposing students to the culture, practices, and language of higher education. Experiences included presentations on topics such as how to apply to college, the financial aid process, and the existence of campus resources designed for student success, such as academic tutoring and coaching in the Bronco Study Zone (Robinson, 2016). The various sessions were designed to engage the students' minds, hearts, and bodies.

The program design kept them moving by holding the various presentations in different buildings across campus – an approach that also accomplished an embedded campus tour. The opening session took place in the college that houses business majors, which was followed by an icebreaker held in the college that houses education and human performance majors. The students toured a dorm to conceptualize the idea that being in college is like living in a “city of students.” They ate lunch in the new cafeteria that one student described as a “mall food court on steroids.”

One session, held in the college that holds fine arts majors, included strolls by Greek sororities and fraternities, whose members then shared the missions and activities of their organizations, and entertained questions from the high school students about what it takes to get into Greek organizations. A student majoring in music also played guitar and sang her own original music, explaining that she chose music because it is a universal language that connects people from all backgrounds and experiences. In a large lecture hall, a “major fair” was conducted to showcase the diverse offering of majors found within a university. In small groups, CPVs shared why they chose their major, what was required to complete their major, and what career they planned to pursue post-graduation. The CPVs lead discussions asking the high school students to share what they learned from the major fair and to answer questions.

In a smaller classroom, CPVs facilitated an activity where students were invited to think about and share responses to five questions designed to encourage them to reflect and contemplate about their futures. The questions were:

- 1) “What is your goal?”;
- 2) “Why is your goal important?”;
- 3) Who inspires you to reach your goal?”;
- 4) “What is standing in your way?”; and
- 5) “What steps are needed to reach your goal?”

College 101

The questions were designed to encourage students to specifically identify their goals as a first step in the application of strategy, to find their “why” to help them persevere and persist in their progress, to identify a support person or champion for their success, and think strategically about barriers to their success and how they could reframe those barriers as challenges to overcome rather than things that would keep them from moving forward. The activity also encouraged them to operationalize their goals and commit to immediate and longer-term steps needed to reach those goals.

Data Analysis and Lessons Learned

Data across four College 101 events that engaged a total of 128 high school students was collected. After coding and analyzing the data three distinct themes concerning emerging academic and professional identities, overcoming shame, and growing self-awareness emerged from the students’ answers to the questions.

Student academic identity is defined as the appropriation of academic values and practices within a sense of self, reflecting the willingness and commitment to the practices of the academic community (White & Lowenthal, 2011). Students’ comments reflected a growing awareness of and desire to improve behaviors needed for academic success. Comments included, “do my homework,” “continue to do well in my classes,” “raise my grades,” “get caught up in algebra,” “turn in my missing work,” “score

high on my SAT,” “do well on my exams,” and “go to the library.” Students develop their academic identity as a subset of general or global identity development (Was & Isaacson, 2008). Students’ answers reflected an awareness that a commitment to academics was needed in order to progress towards goals related to emerging professional identities. Students’ comments included that they wanted to “go to graduate and go to a good college,” “find a school that is the right fit for me,” “sign up for scholarships,” “research about career fields and colleges,” “look up how many years it takes to get a business degree,” and “one step I can do this week regarding web design is make sure I know the classes necessary in college.”

Representing a diverse range of career interests, students expressed professional goals representing desires to become a dancer, lawyer, web designer, professional athlete, pediatrician, photographer, welder, clothing entrepreneur, military defense contractor and weapon design engineering, music producer, graphic designer, pilot, orthodontist, counselor, and hair dresser. One student stated she wanted to be a mother, and another’s goal was “to be a superstar!” Students were also able to connect the importance of doing well in high school to earn a degree, launch a career, and realize positive life outcomes. This connected to students’ “why” in terms of larger motivating factors. One student commented, “Money is power. No money – no car, no house.” Other comments included, “financial freedom,” and

College 101

“money to be able to relieve things.” Commonly expressed motivators tied to the importance of family. “I want to make my parents happy,” “I want to be able to support my family,” “no one in my family has a degree from college,” and “so I won’t have to struggle when I get my own family.” Other comments that stood out included, “to control my future,” “it’s important to me morally,” “showing people that I’ve made it in the world,” “to be happy,” “to accept change,” “I want to find a place where I can thrive,” “make a difference in the world,” and the comment that pierced my heart the most - “I want to live a life that is worth the pain of existence. I want to matter.” Students’ comments also reflected struggles with feelings of shame. Brown (2008) defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed, and therefore unworthy of acceptance or belonging...Shame creates feelings of fear, blame, and disconnect” (p. 29). Comments that reflected students’ sense of shame included “always putting myself down making myself feel like a can’t do it,” “me not believing in myself,” “fear,” “being scared of judgement,” “self-doubt,” and “my lack of confidence and not being willing to take risks.”

Yet, students also talked about a commitment to developing shame resilience by developing a positive mindset and mental toughness from a positive attribution perspective, as seen in comments including that they planned to “stay focused and never stop,” “diminish all the irrelevant stress holding me back,”

“give 100% effort every day,” and “never stop reaching for my goal and don’t let anyone distract me.” Attribution perspective is explained through Weiner’s (2000) Theory of Attribution as the process by which individuals perceive the causes for their successes and failures. When a positive attribution perspective, in which students feel they have control over future success and failures, is applied to feelings of shame, a student’s approach to challenges and responses to failure may improve, positively affecting their academic success and future performance goal orientation.

The fourth question was “Who inspires you to reach your goal?” Answers to this question reflected that students find inspiration from family members, teachers, coaches, and other influential people outside of their families and school including bosses and celebrities. Students also commented that inspiration comes from themselves. Some comments reflecting this diversity of influence included “my inspiration is my daughter,” “my dance teachers who push me to be more confident,” “Drake” (musician and rapper), “one person who inspires me is Kobe” (Kobe Bryant, former professional basketball player), “my mom inspires me because she pushes me to do better and achieve my goals.” Another student commented, “I inspire myself because I know where I want to be and I won’t settle for less.”

The last session of the day involved showing a video recorded by Dr. Hernandez titled, “You Belong.” In his video, Dr. Hernandez

College 101

talked to the audience, stating that they too belong in college, no more or no less than anyone else. With passion and an urgency of purpose in his voice formed from past experiences, he explained, “It’s o.k. for people to not believe in you. It’s o.k. for people to give up on you. That’s perfectly fine. What’s not o.k. is for you to give up on you and for you to not believe in you. That’s not okay” (“Overcoming Gang, 2015”).

Table 1.
College 101 Post-event Survey (N=122)

Survey Questions	Strongly Agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Strongly Disagree n (%)
1. Meeting and spending time with college students helped me understand what it is like to be a college student.	50 (41)	46 (29)	10 (12)	0	0
2. College 101 taught me information about college that I did not previously know.	43 (35)	55 (45)	8 (7)	1 (1)	0
3. I was inspired to go to college.	55 (45)	43 (35)	8 (7)	1 (1)	0
4. I enjoyed being a part of College 101.	49 (40)	33 (27)	10 (12)	1 (1)	0
5. I would encourage my friends to attend College 101.	66 (52)	34 (28)	8 (7)	0	1 (1)

With that emotional and inspiring end to the event, students were given backpacks, pens, lanyards, etc., assembled for a group photo, and were loaded back on the bus. As the bus pulled away, the CPVs stood along the sidewalk, shouting and waving goodbye to high school students, guarded and apprehensive at the beginning of the day, who now were sticking their arms and heads

out of the bus windows, waving and smiling back, shouting “thank you” to their new college friends.

The Impact

A post-event survey was administered to the students, the results of which are in Table 1. One survey question asked what they liked most about College 101. Comments reflected the importance of the Real Talk approach to helping the students connect their own lives and experiences to the potential of college for their future.

Students stated:

- “I like how they gave us advice”
- “Students tell personal experiences”
- “The different stories and passage of knowledge”
- “That they actually talked to us about their life before college”
- “The stories I heard”

College 101

- “It was impacting to me as a homeless youth”
- “Getting to talk to the college students to see what they really think and feel”
- “The students are just like me; they are relatable”
- “How WMU shared their experiences”
- “Realizing no matter that GPA or where you come from you can still go to college”
- “The inspiration and determination for us to be great”
- “The student volunteer stories”
- “Talking with the WMU students who have experienced this stuff”
- “People telling their experiences”
- “I liked how they changed my view on college”

Feedback from the high school counselors who accompanied the students on the trip was very positive. One counselor said to me, “Thank you for sharing your life story and your heart with the students. This was the very best college experience/tour I have been on. I have taken at least 60-70 college tours!” Another stated that on the bus ride home she heard students “talking about going to college in ways she had never heard them talk before.”

The program was also transformative for the CPVs. One CPV, a senior, said volunteering with College 101 was one of his favorite experiences as a college student. The shared College 101 experience helped the CPVs forge meaningful relationships with each other and the program cultivated a sense of belonging among the CPVs. They hung out together

outside of the program. One CPV confided that they all thought of their College 101 peers as family.

For me, the experience was one of pure joy. After each event, I found myself physically and emotionally exhausted, yet full of new energy, hope, and belief in the importance of higher education. The experience reaffirmed for me why I choose a career in higher education. The bonds I formed with my CPVs are strong. I keep in touch with those who have graduated, and we reminisce about the powerful experience of empowering at-risk high school students through College 101. Not only were the high school students changed, so were we. As I reflect further on the impact of College 101, I wonder how my dad’s life could have been different if he had experienced a program like College 101 when he was in high school, and if my life and the history of my family might have been different. I will never know, but at least I can help others like him today. That is one reason why I am thankful that Dr. Hernandez used his experiences to create College 101. In turn, if my efforts, in some small way, contributed to helping students like the younger versions of my dad and Dr. Hernandez travel a different path, then I am proud of that contribution to making the world a better place. 

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College 101

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