

Encouraging Student Success Through Innovative Pathways

Evalyn Gleason 22 April 2015

Healthy adolescent development requires a broad range of academic, social, creative, interpersonal and physical opportunities. Unfortunately, poverty often derails these opportunities, leaving young people to struggle without support, guidance and, in many cases, basic education. This is especially apparent in Philadelphia, which with a rate of 12.9% tops the list of large cities for residents living in deep poverty; deep poverty is defined as those who live below half the federal poverty level. In Philadelphia, that means that a family of three is living on an annual income of about \$10,000 (Lubrano, 2014). Forty percent of all children are living below the poverty line, and 90% of students in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) live in poverty and receive free or reduced lunches (Anonymous, 2010).

The tragedies of poverty have been exacerbated in recent years as the SDP has continued to see its funding slashed. In 2012, the district was forced to cut \$1 million, resulting in layoffs of thousands of employees (nurses, guidance counselors and teachers) and the closing of 23 schools. According to a three-part NPR series by Claudio

Sanchez and Eric Westervelt, this forced some schools to absorb upwards of 250 students in the few weeks before school started in the fall and to do so with significantly reduced staffs. In 2014, the budget deficit was upwards of \$216 million, and although the School District of Philadelphia ultimately received the funding it had sought, a number of factors led to another round of closings at the start of the 2014–2015 school year that left students at seven additional schools displaced once again. This dramatic understaffing and shuffling of students has had severe consequences; college counselors have been eliminated, students' support through the grueling college application process has disappeared, advanced placement classes have been slashed and extracurricular activities have been abolished. Compounding these material losses is the message that is sent to students: You are not valued.

Within this overly bleak context, programs like those provided by the University Community Collaborative (UCC) have become more important than ever. Since 2000, UCC has been providing afterschool programs, credit-earning internships, and paid summer employment to high school students with the goal of building confidence while delivering the tools to assist them in becoming community leaders and change agents. Through the Collaborative Continuum—programs that focus on leadership skills, media literacy and community building—students zero in on issues that are meaningful

and pertinent to their lives. They work in small teams to create media-based projects that address and investigate issues such as homelessness, the school-to-prison pipeline and the racism in our criminal justice system. The Collaborative's aim is to give students a space where they can find their voices, and where their voices and perspectives are not only listened to and respected but also celebrated, and the Continuum enables them to do this over a multiyear period.

Housed at Temple University, UCC has four media-based programs, including an award-winning youth-produced TV news show, POPPYN (Presenting Our Perspective on Philly Youth News). On POPPYN, students serve as the writers, researchers, reporters and editors for their quarterly episodes, which focus on people and organizations that are doing positive things with and for young people in Philly. In addition, the VOICES afterschool program offers a safe space where students can explore their identities and work alongside one another to create projects that illustrate that exploration; the POWER internship offers students the opportunity to earn school credit while doing research in a college environment; and in the Youth Action Scholars program, students develop and conduct workshops around their media work that encourage constructive conversations and evaluations of the issues presented.

Each of the four programs is facilitated by UCC Leaders Corps members, who are often former Collaborative

participants—high school graduates—who are now currently enrolled in college or gaining skills to enter the professional workforce. As young people themselves, the Leaders Corps members offer a vital near-peer relationship, and they often serve as mentors and role models for students. Being located on a college campus provides countless benefits, such as access to resources and information, while also giving the added bonus of exposing students to campus life, which demystifies the college experience and contributes to a college-going culture. Over 85% of program participants go on to higher education, with many being awarded scholarships.

The overarching goal of the continuum is to foster young leaders by building the necessary foundations of confidence and self-esteem, developing the 21st century skills upon which effective leaderships rests, creating an awareness of larger social, economic and political issues and nurturing the kinds of values that underlie a fair and just world. The approach is distinguished by its emphasis on long-term development (the Continuum), its deliberate incorporation of youth leaders into its organizational structure (the Leaders Corps), its strong social justice orientation and its university location. Most organizations provide short-term, discrete programming for youth with many, if not all, of the decisions made by adults. From the beginning, the Collaborative decided to meet young people where they were and to honor, nurture and help amplify youth voices. UCC realized that young people

needed opportunities and support over the long haul and thus began developing the programming continuum to provide such opportunities. The widespread inequalities that many urban youth face led to embracing a social justice orientation. Finally, integration into the university resulted from the faculty status of the UCC's founder and executive director (a political science professor at Temple). Collectively, these four attributes have shaped a cadre of high school and college students who have pursued the civic pathway to college and the college pathway to leadership.

As we move forward as a city, it is important to encourage, highlight and celebrate the successes of our students. Organizations like the University Community Collaborative are instrumental in supporting students and showcasing the positive attributes of our very talented youth, and continuing to innovatively address issues related to poverty and education is imperative for the success of our young people.

References

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Author Biography

Evalyn Gleason is currently serving as an AmeriCorp VISTA as the College Access Coordination at the University Community Collaborative. She aspires to continue work in the nonprofit field because she has always fostered a passion for children's rights, advocacy and education equality. Ms. Gleason hopes to one day be a champion, both domestically and abroad, for children who face hardships, turmoil and inequality.