College 101: Introducing At-Risk Students to Higher Education

by Paul Hernandez

Before graduate school, before my undergraduate degree, before community college, all throughout K-12, I was an “at-risk” student—at risk of dropping out of school. Administrators and teachers often spoke of me as a thing rather than a person. They struggled to connect with me and my homeboys or to help us see a world beyond the Los Angeles ghettos we called home. Rather than trying alternative methods to connect with students like us, our schools funneled most resources toward college-track students. They went on visits to universities, museums, and corporate headquarters, while we were sentenced to meaningless repetitive tasks. Eventually, I dropped out.

But during those early years, I took note of the things that seemed unjust and now I direct my academic work toward engaging students like us and providing them with the opportunities and experiences that support educational success. What would have helped us? What if funding had been directed toward at-risk students? How would we have benefitted by a customized trip to a university? Would this have inspired, enlightened, and empowered me to continue with high school? Through my collaborative work with other educators of at-risk students, I am just now seeing the answers to these questions.

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FORGING A PARTNERSHIP

I met Dori Ike in 2008 at a local community college. After 10 years as a high school teacher, she still worried she wasn’t fully connecting with her most challenging students, those she described as being in danger of not graduating for a variety of reasons: homelessness, substance abuse, or conflict with teachers. She was most concerned with finding ways to hook students who felt defeated and stigmatized in school. She did not blame the students, their parents, or even the community—she was searching for ways to become a more effective, successful teacher.

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I was thrilled to meet Ms. Ike, whose concerns aligned with mine. Like Ms. Ike, I also see a population of students who aren’t reached, even by successful programs that aim their efforts at “high school students from low-income families; and... from families in which neither parent holds a bachelor’s degree.” Still left behind are students who are disengaged, failing classes, and constantly facing disciplinary issues: students who are definitely not viewed as prospective college students. Because of their volatile relationships with schools, these students typically reject outreach attempts by programs and schools.

It is these students who led me to create Real Talk, an alternative pedagogy that connects teachers and students with curriculum through a style of dialogue regarding real life experiences. Real Talk is an instructor-led discussion surrounding a series of broad, engaging themes that motivate student-oriented outcomes, created to establish connections, understanding, trust, empathy and caring for one another. Real Talk sessions focus on topics selected by the instructor that he or she can personalize from life experience and connect with each student’s relation to feelings evoked or memories stimulated (e.g., triumph, happiness, stigmatization). It is important to include positive and negative experiences to create broader connections with students. My goal with Real Talk was to help teachers and students connect, minimize distractions in the classroom and increase passing rates in a program established to help students achieve their General Educational Development (GED).

As I began to unravel and explore my findings, I was eager to share them with people who could put them into practice. Ms. Ike not only provided an opportunity to share my findings but also became a collaborator who allowed me to continue working with at-risk students. Ms. Ike, on her own accord, met with me for training on my approach. I shared with her my methods for building dialogue with stu-
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dents, developing and sustaining meaningful relationships with students, and how to
merge her connection with students to class curriculum to increase passing rates.

After Ms. Ike and I had been working together for more than a year, she was
approached by her school’s statistician who, after analyzing all the teachers’ pass-
ing rates, noted an 8.8 percent increase in the passing rates of Ms. Ike’s class from
2008 to 2009. This change led the school’s administration to invite me to speak
about the details of my pedagogy and instruction with Ms. Ike.

This encouragement reinforced our belief in a need to provide an avenue for
these students to see education beyond the boundaries of high school. It was time

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for an entirely different future empowered by education. This is when we began to
develop College 101 trips for at-risk students. The idea was to host 50 of Ms. Ike’s
students per semester at Central Michigan University (CMU) through a college
visit specifically designed to engage and inspire at-risk students. Fortunately, our
plans matched the specific needs of the district, where layoffs in Michigan’s auto
industry had caused significant increases in poverty rates. The at-risk population
had risen to an historic 40 percent. Understanding the critical need to create
opportunities for those students, the school district committed $8,000 to fund four
College 101 trips over three years (2009-2011).

The district’s understanding of College 101’s value was evident not only by the
financial commitment, but more importantly through the shared understanding
that students’ failure to achieve academically in high school is not necessarily a
reflection of their ability to attend and succeed in college. Although students who
lack access to the social networks and social capital that lead to school success are
less likely to enroll in college and students from families that are not privileged
financially “are disadvantaged in the competition for academic rewards,” College
101 would help level the playing field. We were confident it would empower at-
risk students by providing social capital and cultural experiences that would fund-
amentally shatter their understanding that college is only accessible for certain
people. It would provide a reason and an opportunity for students to re-engage
with school.

Typically, college applicants or their parents contact the admission’s offices or
receive an invitation from universities to arrange standard college tours which are
usually designed for and target students who already expect to attend college.
Schools invite “prospective students and their families… to explore academic
offering, spacious residence hall rooms and other campus amenities.” These traditional tours are not intended to empower at-risk students to see college as a realistic possibility or to inspire them to attend college at all. On most campuses, they lack in-depth engagement with students, and fail to offer meaningful interactions with college students and professors: necessary components for success.

With at-risk students in mind, we aimed to make our program different; adding a more personal component; connecting students’ passions with specific majors and student organizations; and simplifying the complex process of college admissions. To develop the most useful—and transformative—college visit, I used

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an interest inventory to find out what the students wanted to know about a university or university life.

We targeted high school sophomores because with one year completed, students have usually undergone the adjustment to high school and still have three years to set and meet goals to support their collegiate aspirations.

THE COLLABORATORS

Offering College 101 required a diverse group of people to become a reality. These involved partners—high school teachers, plus university students and faculty—were necessary to create this one-of-a-kind experience.

Ms. Ike recruited colleagues willing to chaperone and, even more importantly, to get to know their students beyond the traditional teacher-student relationship. To make this work, teachers would have to be enthusiastic listeners, willing to hear and learn their students’ likes and dislikes, frustrations with school or teachers, and anything else students might want to share. These teachers also needed to be willing to share more about their lives as sisters, brothers, mothers, and fathers. Many students don’t see their teachers as people who exist beyond the classroom. Teachers are components in a system that alienates them, not people who shop for groceries and go to movies. Ms. Ike found three teachers who would eagerly help debunk this idea.

Our next partners were the CMU students who would serve as important partners and models to our high-school visitors. Using class announcements, e-mails to former classes, and by encouraging the use of students’ social networks, I recruited 31 students to attend the first informational meeting for volunteers. To inform and inspire them, I began by sharing my story of the struggles that led me to want to help at-risk students. I identified my vision of College 101 and empha-
sized the intricate and crucial role that these volunteers could play in positively impacting students’ lives. One student shared her reflection about the meeting: “As the story of Paul’s history was shared, the inspiration and purpose for the project became clear and the passion behind it was unmistakable. It is in those first few minutes that each volunteer became fully invested in and committed to College 101 and each visiting student they would meet.”

The volunteers, who eventually numbered 60, helped me develop an agenda that addressed each College 101 objective and they also participated in the process of creating and assigning roles, each of them vital to connecting with our visitors.

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We grouped these volunteers into four categories: (1) walk-around volunteers, (2) station volunteers, (3) runners and research volunteers, and (4) major fair volunteers. Each played a vital role during the visit.

Walk-around volunteers: These 15 students had the primary task of providing personal interactions and setting up a comfortable environment for the visitors. For most of their day, the walk-around volunteers would accompany our visitors, answer their questions and share lessons learned. One such lesson: unlike the high school teachers who remind students of homework due, college professors expect their students to keep track of deadlines.

Station volunteers: At 11 locations around campus, these volunteers shared personal experiences and delivered presentations on topics ranging from music to majors.

Runners and research volunteers: Tasked with finding immediate answers to visitors’ questions, the runners accompanied visitors and delivered quick responses through the use of an iPad or by calling the researcher. When printed material was useful, the runner picked up printouts from the researcher. Impressed high school students learned that their questions are important.

Major fair volunteers: Working closely with me, 32 volunteers hosted a major fair that provided accessible and interesting information on 16 areas of study, conveying that each area would be available to our visitors someday.

THE EXPERIENCE

When the buses finally rolled on to campus, we were all nervous and excited to finally meet our 50 visiting students. As they exited the bus, their facial expressions seemed surprised yet reserved. They weren’t sure what to expect. My students were prepared for this reaction and immediately began the introduction process. I
let my students take the lead while we all walked to an auditorium to officially kick off College 101. I reflected on our visitors’ body language, which was similar to my own during my first days of college. They did not smile and stared at everything with a stern seriousness. They were alert; yet, subdued almost as if making a point to show they weren’t afraid and were not impressed. Most of the visitors stuck closely together within their groups as if they found comfort in each other as they walked into the building. It seemed that with much apprehension the students were merely searching for something safe and real. While my transition to college took many, isolating months, College 101 would take just one day to provide a new perspective of college and learning through evidence. College can be both real and safe, our visitors would learn.

In the auditorium, I launched College 101 with an introduction that implemented the Real Talk component of my pedagogical approach. As I took the stage, a building from downtown Los Angeles was projected on a screen behind me. This building, I told them, was where I sifted through trash bins in search of food after days without eating. At that time, school was the last thing on my mind and college didn’t even exist to me. Simply surviving was paramount. But eventually, I revealed, I got to a point where I realized I didn’t want the life I was living: eating garbage and living in deep poverty. After failing in school for many years, I realized that education could be my guide out. Standing there in the auditorium, I told our visitors that the process was difficult and I found my first steps to college scary, overwhelming. I felt inept. It seemed that everyone else knew what to do and how to do it. I told them that I wasn’t the most educated student and I didn’t come from a family with collegiate experience or money, but I was taught to never quit — and, as the years progressed, a few outstanding professors and a mentor helped me become better at school. I concluded this Real Talk with our visitors by sharing that College 101 would offer them the resources that I had been denied. I told them: College is within your reach too.

Next, our visitors were joined by two student volunteers who broke down the university application process, admissions requirements, and terminology; explained financial aid and scholarships; and talked about resources like varied class schedules, how to look up professor ratings, and the power of student preference in academics. This presentation, both informative and entertaining, provided a crucial foundation to understanding college. Throughout and after the discussion, the visitors asked questions and then the presenters confirmed their under-
standing and engagement through questions back at them. At the conclusion, students were divided into small groups of seven for campus tours with the walk-around volunteers. In their groups, students could further get to know the student volunteers leading their assigned group. After more in-depth introductions, we prepared to embark on our campus tour.

At each station stop, volunteers incorporated their experiences into their presentations, using humor and frequent questions to engage their audience. The first stop was a music presentation, where a volunteer led a game of “Name that Tune” as student musicians played everything from classical to country. Through the music, the students shared their passions and personal stories, and explained how they combined music with education.

At lunch in the campus dining hall, our visitors found themselves amidst the hustle of college students surrounded by what seemed to be infinite buffets and food stations. Among the clamor of chairs, silverware, and food production, aromas of savory meat, garlic, and bread served as invitations for all to explore the plethora of options. There was a lot of running to fill plates, and students asking “can we eat whatever and as much as we want?” But after the initial madness, the volunteers and students settled in to eat and talk, side by side. The teachers and I supervised the students’ interactions in a non-imposing way, blending into the background to avoid disrupting conversations and facilitating interactions only when necessary. This time was critical to establishing levels of comfort and camaraderie to enrich, inform, and positively impact both visitors and volunteers.

At the first station following lunch, our visitors met a volunteer who nearly dropped out of high school herself. She shared that she grew up in a chaotic home where both of her parents were alcoholics. During middle school, when one of her parents died due to alcoholism, she fell into a downward spiral. Then, as if things could not get worse, in high school her other parent also died. Yet, through the pain and heartbreak, this at-risk student overcame her obstacles to become a successful university student. It’s a myth that all college students come from traditional backgrounds or stereotypical families, she said. Just look at her. She decided to use high school as a way to excel and go to college—a form of freedom and empowerment—and she told our visitors that they could do the same.

Next, we visited the major fair, which highlighted 16 fields of study, each with its own creatively designed information stations. At the dietetics station, for example, visitors saw pictures of current, popular Mixed Martial Arts fighters and read...
quotes from those fighters, explaining how they used professional dieticians to reach their goals. Sample diets were displayed, as well as results of these diets on the fighters’ bodies. The visiting students were shocked to learn there was a major leading to this kind of career. Over at the biology station, our visitors met live animals, including a giant tortoise, bearded lizards, and various insects (all supervised by college faculty) and learned about salaries and job opportunities. Each station brought the majors to life, making them tangible and real.

The two remaining stations, a residential dorm room and the university athletic facility, showed the full range of the college experience. Instead of an empty, generic dorm room, our visitors peered into the real dorm rooms of two station volunteers, filled with lofted beds, futons, loosely organized books and supplies, bags of laundry, bright posters, crates of clothing and toiletries, all seemingly choreographed perfectly to their favorite tunes. At the athletic facilities, CMU athletes shared their student-athlete experiences and led a tour of the variety of athletic activities and resources available to college students.

Surprisingly, the at-risk students had been adamant about attending a college lecture, which we gladly included as the final activity. I presented a demonstration lecture, “The Social Construction of Race and its Consequences,” enhanced by a PowerPoint previously used in my actual classes. I asked 30 of my current CMU students to attend this mock lecture to ask questions and interact as they normally would in class. After class, I dismissed my students and turned my attention to the visitors. I thanked them for their participation and concluded the College 101 tour with another Real Talk discussion intended to leave a lasting impression of their college visit.

“Thank you,” I told them. “I want to thank every single one of you who came to visit us today for allowing us to show you new and different things from a world that we want to help make you a part of. I spent my life doubting myself and believing that people and teachers who told me I would amount to nothing, end up in prison, or die in the streets were telling the truth. Countless people told me that I was not college material yet, here I stand in front of all of you as Dr. Paul Hernandez. At the end of this day, I stand in front of all of you asking you, practically begging you, to know, understand, and believe that after what you have learned today, that attending a university is not only within your reach but a place for you to excel. I hope that today impacted you enough to want to achieve your education in order to be by my side and change this world by offering opportunities to others who may think they don’t have opportunities within education. I will be waiting for you! Thank you for joining us today!”

At the departure, boarding the bus back to high school, the visiting students were clearly energized, openly thanking us and excitedly waving good-bye. Their genuine excitement left a strong impression on all of us who worked together to make it happen. As they left, we felt optimistic that we could see them again in the future — in our classrooms and campus meeting places. As they pulled away, I was filled with many emotions. I was sad to see them go because the uncertainty of their futures scared me. My hope was that we were able to give enough of
ourselves through tools and inspiration to empower these students toward a new found academic success, which would ultimately allow them to use education as a platform to achieve their dreams. In the end, I smiled, inspired and fulfilled by the hope and potential I saw in every student and the genuine positive change I wit
tnessed in their attitudes throughout the day.

THE IMPACT

To assess the inaugural College 101 tour, Ms. Ike and her colleagues formally surveyed their students, and also informally compiled the CMU students’ thoughts. This gave us a better understanding of the overall impact of the trip and informed any adjustments for upcoming College 101 tours.

A primary goal of College 101 was to see increased academic motivation in our students. College 101 is about creating opportunities for students to dream big and envision futures empowered by education as engineers, scientists, or teachers, or any other dream of their creation. One student wrote, “This trip helped me in choosing what I want out of life. It helped me get motivated to get better grades, to have a better future.” The tour also broadened students’ understanding of what is possible for them. Before the trip, many at-risk students felt that “someone like them” was not college material. An astonishing 89 percent of participating stu
dents reported a complete change in confidence about their potential to attend college after the College 101 experience. One student shared, “I learned that no matter where you come from or what you have experienced, anyone can make it in college.”

Ms. Ike conducted a second survey with her students several weeks after the trip. The responses continued to reflect the significant impact of College 101, including 90 percent reporting a clearer understanding of college and the application process. Students shared their experience and new ambition with parents. “I told my parents all about the trip and taught them about financial aid, scholarships, and other things that help people like us who can’t afford college.” Another student shared, “I told my parents about my experience and how much I loved it. How now I really want to go to college.” Also, parents called Ms. Ike or thanked her during parent-teacher conferences for their child’s experience on the trip.

The CMU student volunteers also experienced a new world, but without leaving their own turf. One humbling reflection was, “I can’t believe how much the kids were not aware of regarding college. I was shocked! It felt amazing to hear them say how much they learned from me by the end of our day.” Many of the vol
teers gained a completely new awareness of the kinds of challenges other stu
dents face. One stated, “It was difficult to hear the challenges these students face in their school and personal life. It’s not that they are unable but they face so many challenges that affect their ability to do well.” These reflections were the norm for the majority of volunteers involved; the trip helped them learn about and con
tribute positively to at-risk students’ lives.

The teacher volunteers were also impressed by the trip, and were in awe of the changes in the students’ perspectives regarding college. Many students expressed a desire to attend a university and felt that now it was something feasible for them.
SPECIAL FOCUS: DEFINING OUR VALUES, AFFIRMING OUR IDEAS

This was monumental for the teachers, who had rarely heard these students discuss education beyond high school. More often, students doubted they would even graduate. Ms. Ike shared, “The biggest realization (change) from this experience is that college can be for anyone, not just the ‘smart kids.’ Students who were not considering post-secondary education before this trip returned with a new perspective on college and themselves. These changes in attitude and behavior are witnessed by me and my colleagues in our classrooms. We notice a renewed interest, leading to increased performances in their classes and higher self-esteem. One of my students commented, ‘my classes are going well and I feel I have gained self-esteem.’ The profound impact of the trip lasts for weeks. The number of students who approach me expressing their gratitude for taking them and their desire to return to learn more has been humbling.”

The impact of College 101—one all its participants—far surpassed our goals. As I reflect, the project looks on paper like a daunting endeavor. In reality, the collaborative structure makes it surprisingly easy to implement. My hope is that this article inspires professors and teachers to come together to provide our students with an experience that is valuable on multiple levels. In fact, it is the at-risk students who need us the most but are typically the least likely to ask for help. College 101 is the type of program that allows our most challenging students to find a place where they can smile and share without experiencing any negative consequences while at the same time learning and gaining tools for a different future. For our college students, we offer an opportunity for them to learn beyond classroom lessons and connect with the world. The college students are able to meet and connect with a group of people with which they may have never have had a chance to interact. For me, I know that witnessing the transformation in our visitors and their perspectives on college is truly empowering. Anybody who follows in our tracks also will see that education can be a tool for a powerful future. Empowering students in this way gives hope that it is possible to combat this nation’s growing epidemic of at-risk youth dropping out of school.

Our day finally ended when the bus pulled away, filled with young people who had found new passion and vigor for education. Later, I sat in my office and reflected, grateful to have served everyone involved in College 101. After exerting so much of myself, I was emotionally drained but I would not have had it any other way. One of my many goals for the day was to inspire the trip participants, yet I myself had been inspired like never before. To have witnessed firsthand the power of diverse groups of people coming together, sharing their passion with one another, and making a difference in each other’s lives was touching. I realized that those who have told me, and continue to tell me, that I am merely an ant trying to move a mountain when it comes to reducing dropout rates, increasing passing rates, and connecting students with college in our country, are wrong. I might be an ant, but I learned through College 101 that I am an ant surrounded by many others working together to move this mountain of a task. For the first time, I did not feel alone on my journey.
END NOTES
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. In Michigan, an at-risk student is defined as a student having at least two of the following characteristics: (a) is a victim of child abuse or neglect; (b) is below grade level in English language and communication skills or mathematics; (c) is a pregnant teenager or teenage parent; (d) is eligible for a federal free or reduced-price lunch subsidy; (e) has atypical behavior or attendance patterns; (f) has a family history of school failure, incarceration, or substance abuse. At-risk can also include students not meeting any of the above criteria, but who have taken the Michigan Educational Assessment Program test and failed to achieve moderate scores on the mathematics or reading tests, or at least 50 percent of the objectives of the science test.
7. Central Michigan University, “Schedule a Visit.”

WORK CITED

About the photograph: Photographer Erik Howard is a former middle-school teacher who founded Southwest Detroit’s Young Nation, a non-profit youth and community development program. The students captured in his photograph attend the Michigan high school that has participated in College 101.