THE IMPACT OF PRE-COLLEGIATE PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR

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THE IMPACT OF PRE-COLLEGIATE PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE IMPACT OF PRE-COLLEGIATE PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR

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Using a strengths-based framework, this study explores how the Fast Forward program supports students in navigating high school challenges, developing essential skills, and fostering a sense of belonging in higher education. By analyzing survey data and family narratives, my research highlights key factors contributing to college readiness, including mentorship, academic support, and personal development. The findings underscore the importance of early intervention and holistic support in closing equity gaps and ensuring long-term student success. This study provides valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and program administrators seeking to enhance pre-collegiate initiatives and improve outcomes for historically marginalized students.

I dedicate this work to all the class of 2025. You are the first group of young people that I have had the privilege of seeing matriculate from elementary to high school. You all have truly challenged and inspired me. Thank you for bringing me on this journey with you, I look forward to seeing your continued greatness!

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CHAPTER ONE

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The successful transition from high school to post-secondary education or the workforce is pivotal in the lives of young people. The rapid advancement of technology and the ever-changing job market demand a comprehensive support system and post-secondary readiness programs (Anderson, 2022).

To prepare students for post-secondary education, colleges should offer college preparation courses, career counseling, mentoring programs, and financial aid options. Programs like these recognize that academic achievement is only one component of students' readiness. Their holistic approach focuses on ensuring that students are academically prepared and equipped with the necessary life skills and resources to succeed after high school (Buchansky, 2021).

Families participating in Fast Forward at Lion University encounter numerous challenges that can hinder their ability to support students in their post-secondary aspirations. Financial constraints are one of the most significant barriers, as parents struggle to pay for college applications, tuition, textbooks, and other expenses. Despite physical access to financial aid, families face challenges navigating scholarship, grant, and loan options (Overcoming Barriers, 2022). In addition to financial difficulties, many families lack knowledge about the college admissions process, financial aid, and career paths. Often, this knowledge gap leaves students underprepared for life after high school, which limits their ability to make informed decisions (Cowan Pitre & Pitre, 2009).

These combined challenges underscore the need for targeted support systems like Fast Forward to bridge the gap in college access and readiness for underrepresented students and their families.

This study examines how families and students of color experience support in post-secondary readiness. It focuses on the 9th-12th grade students and families participating in Fast Forward at Lion University (pseudonyms are used for the program and University). This study seeks to highlight how students of color are being supported through post-secondary readiness programs and to measure their overall success.

Problem of Practice

Post-secondary readiness for high school students is a complex issue that impacts not only students but also families, educators, and society. This study focuses on the problem of practice that many high school students face: They are not adequately prepared for the challenges and expectations of post-secondary education, which can decrease their opportunities for success and achievement in their future academic and professional careers.

One key factor contributing to this problem is uneven access to high-quality educational resources and support systems. Many high schools, particularly those in low-income and under-resourced communities, need more resources or organizations to provide students with the guidance and support they need to succeed in post-secondary education (Ferguson et al., 2007). Resource deficits can include, but aren't limited to; a lack of college and career counseling services, limited access to rigorous academic coursework, and insufficient support or staff to address students' diverse learning needs.

Another challenge is that the academic expectations and demands of post-secondary education can be overwhelming for students without sufficient preparation. College-level coursework is often more rigorous and demanding than high-school coursework, and students who are not adequately prepared may need help to keep up with the pace and intensity of their classes (Balfanz et al., 2016).

Finally, the transition to post-secondary education can be stressful and confusing, particularly for underserved students who may have minimal support and guidance compared to their peers.

Justification of the Problem

Transitioning from high school to college is a critical time for many students. During this time, students face numerous challenges such as academic rigor, increased independence, and social adjustments. Unfortunately, many students are not adequately prepared for the transition and struggle to meet the demands of college. Therefore, pre-college and post-secondary readiness courses have become increasingly necessary to address these challenges.

One main reason for the need for pre-college readiness courses is the high number of students who need to gain the necessary skills for post-secondary education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), approximately 40% of two-year and 20% of four-year college students take at least one remedial course (NCES, 2019). This statistic highlights the need for transitional courses, as it shows that many students are not adequately prepared for college-level coursework.

Post-secondary readiness courses, also known as career readiness courses, are designed to prepare students for the workforce. These courses cover critical thinking,

communication, problem-solving, and teamwork skills. The aim is to equip students with the skills necessary to succeed in the workforce and to help bridge the gap between education and employment. The need for post-secondary readiness courses is evident as the job market evolves and employers demand a more highly skilled workforce. According to a report by the National Governors Association, by 2020, 65% of all jobs will require post-secondary education and training (National Governors Association, 2012). This statistic highlights the importance of post-secondary readiness courses as they help students develop the skills and knowledge necessary for success in the workforce.

While the need for pre-college and post-secondary readiness courses is clear, the perceived effectiveness from the parent/caregiver perspective is under-evaluated. If families and their students do not see value in these pre-college opportunities, they may not actively participate in post-secondary readiness programs.

Transitional courses help students develop the foundational skills necessary for success in college, while career readiness courses equip students with the required skills for success in the workforce. Both types of courses help bridge the gap between education and employment, ultimately leading to more tremendous success and higher levels of achievement for students (Frazier, 2025). As such, educators and policymakers must continue to prioritize and invest in pre-college and post-secondary readiness courses to support the success of all students.

Historical Context

The Education Opportunity Center (EOC) was founded in January 2022 and is intended to create equitable pathways to college, including but not limited to Lion University (Lion U) (Education Outreach Center, n.d.). The goals of the EOC are to:

- Effectively growing and strengthening the University's network among elementary, middle school, and high school educators;

- Developing and implementing outreach and engagement strategies to reach constituents that are currently underserved and underrepresented at the University and

- Helping to advance Pitt's mission of forging a larger community of diverse scholars for the 21st Century.

How the EOC has attempted to meet these goals are through the following programs:

- Fast Forward

- Parkway Admissions Collaboration

- Parkway Public Scholars

- RISE

Originating from The Craig School of Engineering in 1988, Fast Forward is a college preparatory program supporting rising 9th through 12th grade students. It was created to engage, support, and recognize pre-college students from historically underrepresented groups in science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics majors and careers. About 50 students participate yearly in what has become a year-long program opportunity (Education Outreach Center, n.d.).

Parkway Admissions Collaboration (PAC) prioritizes 9-12 grade students who attend University Prep, Westside Academy, and the I Promise program. Upon graduation and completion of the program, students who attend one to two years at a community college can transfer their credits and complete their bachelor's degree at Lion U (Education Outreach Center, n.d.).

Parkway Public Scholars grants guaranteed admission to one of Lion U's five campuses. Each student is eligible for up to 2,000 in funding and full tuition assistance for students who require a Pell Grant. Currently, 10 Parkway Public City Schools are eligible for this program (Education Outreach Center, n.d.).

RISE facilitates the journey to Lion U for youth and young adults engaged in the foster care system by eliminating obstacles to accessing a postsecondary education (Education Outreach Center, n.d.).

The EOC itself is shaped by a collective of voices that include students, parents, local school personnel, Lion U faculty, and community members. Each of these voices supports the program in achieving its mission. Currently, the EOC serves 21 Parkway City Public and Charter Schools and partners with the Smallwood Community Engagement Center.

The EOC at Lion U is composed of five women. Four identify as black, and one as Caucasian. The team is close-knit and hand-picked by the director. Each has a variety of experiences that will contribute to the center's success. Under her direction, the Associate Director, Pathway Development and Outreach Coordinator, Senior Program Coordinator, and administrative assistant all support managing the four programs. Although the team is still relatively new, it is fully committed to supporting students and

families to the best of its ability. They continue to collaborate and rely on each other as they expand their programs.

Unfortunately, even with the best intentions and team, the EOC has been unable to measure the effectiveness of its program options and implementation during its time on campus.

Deficiencies in Organizational Knowledge

Many post-secondary readiness programs have had great success, especially those that serve underserved populations. However, one major issue within many programs is that they lack long-term support for students and families. They often focus on short-term supports that include test prep, application completion, and essay writing (Perna, 2015). Karp (2019) suggests that students benefit from ongoing advising, workshops, and academic support that extends beyond just the application process to college.

Additionally, some programs fail to address students' expectations of college and how they differ from their secondary experiences. Consequently, students lack critical thinking skills, study habits, and time management. Leaving them unprepared for the increased rigor of their coursework (Conley, 2014). This disconnect often leads to students taking remedial coursework, which can increase their time spent in college and their financial obligations (Bailey et al., 2010).

Overview of Theoretical Framework, Methodology, and Research Questions

Social capital, a term popularized by Pierre Bourdieu and further developed by Robert Putnam and James Coleman, has gained attention in education for its potential to influence students' academic achievement and overall well-being (Putman et al., 2004). Tara Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework (2005) critiques social

capital theories and creates a discourse that de-centers whiteness while highlighting the importance of cultural and social assets within marginalized communities (Denton & Boklage, 2020). This study seeks to explore the implications of college readiness programs like Fast Forward through the lens of social capital and Yosso's (CCW) framework through the following research questions:

1. How do the families and students of color participating in Fast Forward at Lion University perceive the effectiveness of college-preparation courses and career counseling in preparing them for post-secondary education or the workforce?

2. What challenges and barriers do the families and students of color face in accessing and benefiting from post-secondary readiness programs, and how do they impact their overall academic success in transitioning from high school to post-secondary education or the workforce?

Review of Related Literature

Theoretical Framework

Community Cultural Wealth Framework (CCW), created by Tara Yosso, was developed to highlight the strengths and assets within communities of color. Through this framework, Yosso argues that contrary to what other deficit-based theorists report, students of color have a significant amount of wealth to bring to the field of education (Yosso, 2005). Within her research, she defined six types of capital that make up the framework; the types are:

- Aspirational Capital pertains to individuals' aspirations, ambitions, and future objectives within communities of color (Yosso, 2005). Yosso underscores that students from these communities often harbor ambitious dreams and solid

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aspirations for personal and collective success, driven by their determination to surmount obstacles and actualize their goals (Yosso, 2005).

- Linguistic Capital encompasses the rich and varied linguistic abilities and practices prevalent within communities of color (Yosso, 2005). She recognizes that many students from these backgrounds are multilingual or possess unique dialects and language skills, demonstrating the value of linguistic diversity in facilitating communication, encouraging cultural exchange, and enhancing language proficiency (Yosso, 2005).

- Familial Capital underscores the role of family and kinship networks within communities of color (Yosso, 2005). It acknowledges familial bonds and support systems that often exist, emphasizing how these connections provide emotional, social, and cultural resources that positively impact students' educational experiences (Yosso, 2005).

- Social Capital refers to the networks, relationships, and community connections accessible to students of color (Yosso, 2005). She emphasizes the significance of communal ties in cultivating opportunities, mentorship, and support within educational settings. These networks offer guidance, open doors to resources, and aid students in navigating intricate systems (Yosso, 2005).

- Navigational Capital centers on the ability of individuals from communities of color to navigate the intricate structures and systems inherent within educational institutions (Yosso, 2005). Yosso recognizes their resilience, adaptability, and adeptness in maneuvering through various challenges, such as institutional

barriers and systemic inequalities, in pursuing their educational objectives (Yosso, 2005).

- Resistant Capital underscores the power of resistance and resilience within communities of color (Yosso, 2005). Yosso acknowledges how individuals and communities resist oppression, discrimination, and inequality, often through activism, cultural preservation, and solidarity (Yosso, 2005). This type of capital highlights the strength and determination inherent in challenging and transforming oppressive systems.

This framework is beneficial for understanding these problems of practice because it challenges traditional views of social capital theories by recognizing and valuing the assets and strengths that communities of color bring to education. Additionally, it supports culturally relevant pedagogy, empowers students, and confronts deficit thinking.

Related Research

Several college access programs across the United States have successfully integrated Yosso's CCW framework into their models to support underrepresented students. The McNair Scholars Program, a federally funded initiative, explicitly cultivates navigational and resistant capital by providing students of color with research opportunities, faculty mentorship, and graduate school preparation (Liou et al., 2016). Similarly, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) emphasizes aspirational and familial capital through family engagement workshops, financial literacy programs, and mentorship opportunities (Welton & Martinez, 2014).

Another example is the College Advising Corps (CAC), which leverages social capital by embedding peer advising and mentorship networks in underserved high schools to enhance college access (McDonough et al., 2015). The Puente Project, implemented in California Community Colleges, integrates linguistic capital by fostering bilingual education and incorporating students' lived experiences into college-level writing courses, reinforcing cultural strengths as academic assets (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Programs, like Fast Forward, demonstrate the effectiveness of having an asset-based approach to college readiness. acknowledging the strengths that students of color bring to their educational experiences.

Community Cultural Wealth & College Readiness

In higher education, CCW has become invaluable in enhancing post-secondary college programs for students of color. Grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT), this discussion sheds light on how acknowledging and harnessing community culture wealth can create a more equitable and enriching educational experience for students of color.

One critical aspect of community cultural wealth is navigational capital, which refers to the skills and knowledge passed down through generations within communities of color to help individuals navigate complex systems like colleges/universities (Yosso, 2005). Recognizing the value of navigational capital, colleges can implement mentorship programs, counseling services, and informational resources that facilitate smooth transitions into college life for students of color. This, in turn, promotes retention and success (Liou et al., 2016).

Additionally, resistance capital involves the strength and resilience developed by marginalized communities when facing adversity and discrimination (Yosso, 2005).

Incorporating culturally responsive teaching practices and creating spaces for cultural affirmation within college programs can validate the experiences of students of color and empower them to persist against adversity. Familial capital, which emphasizes the importance of family support and networks, can be honored by engaging families in the college experience, fostering a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018).

Furthermore, recognizing and valuing the diverse forms of capital that students of color bring can lead to more culturally responsive teaching, better support systems, and improved educational outcomes. By embracing these concepts, colleges can work towards dismantling structural barriers and creating an environment where all students can thrive, regardless of their racial or cultural background (Howard, 2019).

Parental Involvement in College Readiness

Parental involvement has long been recognized as a significant factor in shaping students' college readiness (Thompson, 2019). In Thompson's study it provides a comprehensive 10-year content analysis of peer-reviewed research, underscoring the multifaceted ways school counseling interventions have addressed college readiness. Many of these interventions recognize the "Community Cultural Wealth" concept as a key resource for maximizing college readiness (Thompson, 2019).

Thompson's (2019) research reveals that effective parental support interventions provide information and tap into the various forms of capital within communities of color. This includes recognizing and valuing the aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital that students and their families bring to the educational journey. Such interventions acknowledge that students from diverse backgrounds possess

cultural strengths and assets that, when acknowledged and supported, it can significantly contribute to their college readiness (Welton & Martinez, 2014).

Leonard (2013) extends this perspective by highlighting how parental support programs can align with the concept of community cultural wealth. His research underscores that effective parental support initiatives should be culturally sensitive and contextually relevant. By embracing and respecting the cultural wealth within diverse communities, educational institutions can create more inclusive and empowering college readiness programs.

In this context, the concept of Community Cultural Wealth becomes instrumental in addressing disparities in college access and success. By recognizing and nurturing the unique strengths and assets of each community, educators and counselors can work collaboratively with parents to cultivate a college experience that is culturally affirming and supportive. This approach enhances college readiness and fosters a sense of belonging and pride in students from underrepresented backgrounds (Strayhorn, 2018).

College Readiness Coursework

The importance of coursework in preparing students for higher education is a recurring theme in both studies, highlighting the role of academic preparation as a critical factor in post-secondary readiness (Agboola, 2006).

Additionally, the connection between coursework and CCW is a crucial aspect to consider in the context of post-secondary readiness. CCW recognizes the cultural and social assets that students bring to their educational experiences, including their ability to navigate academic challenges (Denton et al., 2020).

Mokher (2021) acknowledges the role of CCW in coursework engagement. The study suggests that when students from diverse backgrounds are encouraged to embrace their cultural strengths, they may be more motivated to pursue advanced coursework and are better prepared for their post-secondary journey. This recognition of CCW can lead to a more inclusive and equitable approach to post-secondary readiness (Mokher, 2021).

Similarly, Harrington and Rogalski's (2020) research demonstrates that accelerated learning programs with rigorous coursework can be designed to be culturally responsive. Acknowledging and valuing students' cultural backgrounds and CCW, programs can create a supportive environment where students feel prepared to engage with challenging coursework, ultimately enhancing their college readiness.

By integrating culturally responsive coursework into college readiness policies and programs, educators can better prepare students from diverse backgrounds for success in higher education while honoring their unique strengths and assets.

Positioning the Study as Action Research

Participatory action research is a collaborative and iterative approach in which researchers and community members collaborate to identify, address, and transform social issues. It strongly emphasizes the active involvement of those directly affected by the issues in all stages of the research process, including problem identification, data collection, analysis, and decision-making (Kindon et al., 2007).

The choice of participatory action research with a critical lens resonates deeply with my epistemological, ontological, and methodological perspectives. Knowledge is socially constructed and context-dependent, aligning with a postmodern epistemology (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019). This research approach recognizes the importance of

multiple perspectives and co-creating knowledge with community members (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

As a former K12 leader and classroom teacher, I saw the impact pre-college programs had on the students I served. In some instances, students were thriving and prepared for their journeys, while others struggled because the plan wasn't clear and there was little or no guidance for families. On many occasions, I observed poorly planned workshops and or students playing "catch up" because they were seniors who didn't know they should have applied to colleges or where to begin. That experience, particularly, deeply influenced my approach to this research because of my commitment to equity, access, and empowerment. As a black woman and an educator of underserved and underrepresented students for over a decade, I understand the importance of creating a safe space where students feel heard, seen, and valued. I also believe in strength-based approaches that focus on our students' positives rather than the challenges.

My ontological stance acknowledges that social phenomena are complex and dynamic, making participatory action research appropriate for exploring multifaceted community issues. The critical lens is essential as it aligns with my commitment to addressing power imbalances, social injustices, and structural inequalities within communities (Kemmis et al., 2014).

The literature associated with this topic strongly supports the use of participatory action research in community-based settings, emphasizing its potential to engage communities, foster collaboration, and lead to transformative change (Kemmis et al., 2014). This approach aligns with the EOC's mission to bridge the gap between academic research and community needs.

Regarding data collection and analysis, action research allows for qualitative methods (e.g., interviews and focus groups) and quantitative methods tailored to the community's specific needs and preferences. This flexibility ensures that the research methods match the context and contribute to the study's effectiveness (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Method

Site or Population Selection

The Education Opportunity Center (EOC) is a small office within the Office of the Provost at Lion U, an educational institution in Parkway, Pennsylvania. It is the epicenter of Lion U's academic outreach efforts. The EOC maintains an infrastructure that operationalizes collaborations and leverages the university's and external communities' assets to enhance college admissions for underserved and underrepresented students to and through college.

The primary goals of the EOC are enhancing educational access and equity, promoting academic achievement, and strengthening the connection between the university and the surrounding community (Education Outreach Center, n.d.).

The Opportunity Center's commitment to community engagement and its focus on educational outreach make it a significant focal point for this study. Its efforts to bridge the gap between the university and the community align with the study's purpose, which involves collaborative research on educational issues within the local community (Education Outreach Center, n.d.).

The choice of the EOC as the study organization is justified by its central role in educational outreach and its strong ties to the local community. Given its history of

addressing educational challenges and its commitment to community engagement, it is an ideal site for researching to improve educational outcomes within the community.

The specific setting within the EOC that will be the focus of this study is the Fast Forward program. This program is a community-based initiative intended to provide a pipeline for students to enter college and pursue science, technology, engineering, and math majors for underserved youth in the Parkway area (Education Outreach Center, n.d.). The program operates within the EOC and collaborates closely with local schools and community- based organizations.

The Fast Forward program is particularly pertinent to this study because it focuses on preparedness for college, which intersects with broader educational issues. The study population comprises youth participants and their families who are engaged with the Fast Forward program at the Opportunity Center. These participants come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, including low-income households, and are primarily students in local 9-12 high schools in the Parkway area. Students ideally enter the Fast Forward program as rising 9th-grade students.

The demographics of the study population are important to the study's purpose because they reflect the specific group most directly affected by the Fast Forward program's initiatives. Understanding the roles and backgrounds of these participants is imperative for assessing the program's impact on educational equity.

Research Role and Positionality

Access. As of December 2023, I have assumed the role of Associate Director at the EOC. In this role, I have access to students, families, Lion U data, and resources.

Donna, the director of the EOC, has also given me access to archived files from previous iterations of Fast Forward.

Additionally, she introduced me to several Lion U staff and faculty members who could be a resource during this study. Lastly, the other staff members within the office have included me in workshops and other EOC events that have allowed me to become a familiar face with students and families. All of these new connections and relationships are critical to gaining the trust of participants and their families.

Influence. My influence within the EOC is interesting because I am a newer staff member. I am still getting to know both people within the EOC, the university, and the students and families the EOC serves. So, in some cases, key stakeholders don't know that my role has been filled and or know very little about my scope of work.

Alternatively, my title and qualifications might create a power dynamic with participants and families. In my experience as an educator and doctoral student, titles often intimidate people (Secules et al., 2021). It is, however, my hope that this research will elevate voices, promote equity, and build sustainable systems to support the long-term success of the Fast Forward program. Keeping these beliefs in mind will determine how I interact with the participants, in order to ensure that they feel respected and valued beyond this research.

Participatory Roles

While conducting this research, I will take on the observer as a participant role. I will have some level of interaction with student and family participants while leading interviews and administering surveys. Still, my primary role will be to observe and collect data accordingly (Becker, 2017). Through my research, the hope is that the

findings can support and influence necessary changes for our families and students. As a newer office, we have the opportunity to create an atmosphere that will embody our mission and vision for years to come.

Reciprocity. Through this research, I will learn about their experiences, needs, and areas we desire to improve. I will also gain information about the EOC that can support their future program options and overall improvements needed for continued success. In exchange, I will help uplift the voices of participants and families, allowing them to feel valued and more invested in the EOC.

Trust. My relationship with the director is the most substantial connection within the EOC. My new role within the office has also allowed me to build relationships with the other women. Through those interactions and time together, they have learned about me and grown to expect and respect my leadership role. Along with that has come trust and confidence that I am here to serve our families and students.

Regarding the Office of the Provost, Donna has played a vital role in making introductions and vetting me to the others. After three months in the role, I have become a source of knowledge and support for many within the office.

Rapport. Since arriving at the EOC, I have been able to attend workshops and celebratory events with students and families. I have also supported our academic mentors as they tutor our participants. Being present at these events has allowed me to learn students' names, become a familiar face, and also a trusted educator. Many of the students now greet me by name, and I know some of their interests and have confidence that throughout the study, our relationships will continue to grow.

Ethical and Political Considerations

As mentioned in the previous sections, I will observe and participate in this study, which I hope will increase my objectivity, while still building rapport with the participants and members of the EOC.

Additionally, throughout the study, I will collaborate with the EOC's stakeholders. When I receive information or data pertinent to the growth and development of the Fast Forward program, I will share the information as frequently as possible.

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary. I will provide pseudonyms to participants and work closely with my dissertation chair and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure confidentiality. In interviews participants can decline to answer questions or stop at any time if they are uncomfortable.

Lastly, participants can check their responses to questions and any other information they provide to ensure the integrity of their experience and study.

Data Collection Methods

In this study, I will act as an observer and participant, primarily focusing on collecting data, while having minimal interactions with participants (Suter, 2000). Each participant and their caregiver will be invited to an interview with me to discuss the EOC. They will be asked open-ended and think-back questions about their experiences, reflections, and overall thoughts about the Fast Forward program's impact and support in their families' post-secondary journeys. The interviews will take place virtually through the Zoom platform to allow participants to be in a place that feels familiar and convenient (Cresswell & Guttterman, 2019). Additionally, each interview will be recorded via the

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Zoom platform; I will take notes and review the transcripts from the 45-minute interviews.

Additionally, I will use electronic survey data collected from the participants of the program. The surveys are given at the end of each semester. Some questions included in the survey are about the participants' knowledge of the topic, engagement, and evaluation of what has been learned. Currently, the data collected from the surveys is housed on a secure network at Lion U, and throughout the study will continue to be stored there.

Data Analysis Procedures

Smith & Osborne's Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has a multi-step process. This method will allow me to analyze the participants' experiences of the EOC more intimately (Alase, 2017). Before analyzing the transcripts, I will read through them to familiarize myself with the data collected. While reading through the transcriptions, I will refer to my research questions to guide my coded themes.

Additionally, I will be using Rev.com to transcribe my p interviews. To clean the transcription data, I will use the notes from the focus groups to ensure that all information is captured accurately.

The first step of the coding process is to read closely the transcript of the focus group interview and write/highlight pertinent information within the left margin. While reading, I will also highlight verbs and actions connected to the possible themes within the interview. As I read through the transcripts, I will also begin to create a list of possible themes that will emerge through my analysis. After compiling a list of the themes, I will use Saldana's (2013) versus coding to find subcategories to these themes

and color code them accordingly on the transcripts. The final step of the process will be to write a narrative explanation of the results using the coded themes from the transcription. While completing the analysis process, I will use memoing to take note of any thoughts, findings, or themes that stand out as noteworthy.

Procedures to Address Trustworthiness: Credibility and Transferability

I will ensure that my findings and interpretations of the data are accurate through two criteria: credibility and transferability (Cresswell & Gutterman, 2019).

Credibility. I plan to meet the credibility criteria through triangulation and member checking. Regarding triangulation, I will use data collected from surveys and interviews to inform my research and potential actions to answer my research questions. Using multiple sources allows the data to have many examples to support my findings (Shenton, 2004). Additionally, I will have all the participants perform member checks or verify the interview findings via email (Cresswell & Gutterman, 2019).

Transferability. Transferability refers to the extent to which my research can be generalized to other studies and situations (Bitsch, 2005). Throughout the study, I plan to employ a thick description of the data collection, analysis, and final reporting. I will also use this criterion when creating interview questions to support receiving in-depth participant responses.

CHAPTER TWO

RESULTS OF RESEARCH

Summary of Analysis

My experience as a Deputy Superintendent of Secondary schools at a New York City (NYC) charter network began my inquiry into pre-collegiate programs or pathways for students of color. While there, I observed many students who had yet to learn what they could or wanted to do after high school. Additionally, most of them were not even aware of their viable options.

Sometimes, students had family members who may have taken a pathway to college. In contrast, others clung to the words of the Out of School Time (OST) staff, which provided them with a 45-minute course per week of college preparatory materials. It was concerning that the slogan "College-Bound" was used to market the type of learning experience students would have if they attended the schools, but the program didn't set students up for success.

Unfortunately, my time in that role was short. Still, within a few months, I was offered another position that would allow me to examine the impact of pre-collegiate programs for underserved and underrepresented students more closely. The office was new, but one of the most prominent programs in the office was a long-standing one within the university.

This study aims to measure the overall impact of pre-collegiate programs on students of color. The results of this mixed methods data collected using research are presented in this chapter. Through family interviews, observations, and surveys, I explore the lived experience and impact of the Fast Forward program.

Participants

      The participants in this study consisted of students and parents currently enrolled in the Fast Forward Program. A total of four families participated in the study. All of the grade levels 9-12 were represented in the survey.

Data Collection

Surveys

      Student participants received a Qualtrics survey, that I created, with the Likert scale questions and protocol in Appendix A.

Interviews

      Families were interviewed using open-ended questions to elicit responses based on personal experiences. Appendix B lists the protocols and questions that were used during the interviews. The interviews were held virtually using the Zoom platform. Each interview was 45 minutes. I recorded the interviews using Zoom. Transcription and coding software, Rev, was used for analysis.

Analysis and Validity

      The family interviews allow participants to share their experiences and views about the Fast Forward program with me, but also hear each other's thoughts in some instances for the first time. Inductive and process coding were used in the analysis of the interview data. Each interview audio recording was transcribed, and I used open coding to identify themes. The survey results were compared to the transcripts to enhance the themes that emerged during the interviews. Saldana and Miles' inductive coding process (2013), has multiple steps that help produce the themes from the data collected. The steps of the process were the following:

1. Familiarization

2. Initial Coding

3. Theme Development

4. Review Themes

5. Final Coding and Refinement

6. Written Narrative

After completing this process, I generated a report using the Rev platform (Rev, n.d.) for further analysis, which provided quotes to support the identified themes. Member checks of the interview transcripts, as well as my initial analysis, were conducted to ensure validity, and themes were shared with participants to verify that their perspectives and thoughts had been accurately captured. All families returned the member-checking tool and agreed with the identified themes.

Findings and Results

Themes

This section presents the findings from the interviews and surveys conducted with families participating in the Fast Forward program, an initiative to support historically underrepresented students in science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (S.T.E.A.M) fields. The interviews offer insights into participants' experiences, program benefits, challenges, and recommendations for improving impact yielded four major themes: (1) college preparation and career exploration in S.T.E.A.M. (2) balancing program commitments with other activities; (3) family engagement and support; and (4) opportunities for improving the program.
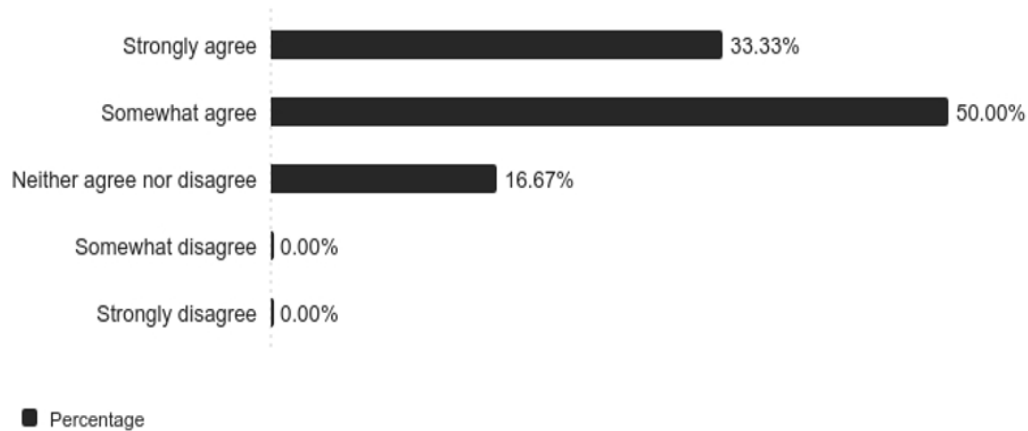
College Preparation and Career Exploration in S.T.E.A.M. A core finding from the interviews was the program's effectiveness in equipping students with essential skills and knowledge to navigate the college application process and explore potential career paths. Participants highlighted the Fast Forward program [MW4] , as an impactful resource for students from underrepresented backgrounds in building foundational skills for college readiness and career planning. Designed by the School of Engineering at Lion University, Fast Forward offers students S.T.E.A.M. Career & College Readiness workshops that incorporate hands-on experiences, academic advising, career exploration, and personal development. Additionally, through this program, students and their families receive support throughout the college application process, financial literacy education for college, and exposure to industry professionals.

Parents and students acknowledged the structured guidance provided through college preparatory sessions and advisory meetings, frequently described as "helpful" and "supportive" in developing students' college application competencies. For example, Jace Abreu, a student participant, underscored the importance of these sessions, noting that they were "helpful for preparing me for college." Jace referred specifically to the study skills college career workshop, which focused on notetaking, study techniques, and executive functioning skills. Additionally, he expressed that his advising sessions also helped guide him in choosing colleges and the next steps in the process (Abreu Family) The following survey data reinforces the sentiments of most families reporting that structured guidance provided through the workshops and advisory sessions was key in them feeling as if they were prepared for the next steps in their post-secondary journey.

Figure 1:

Answers to Question Three

Q4 - I learned something new this semester about a college major or career field.

Strongly agree	33.33%
Somewhat agree	50.00%
Neither agree nor disagree	16.67%
Somewhat disagree	0.00%
Strongly disagree	0.00%

■ Percentage

In addition, participants pointed to the significance of career exploration sessions that introduced students to various S.T.E.A.M fields. The program provided students with a broader understanding of the professional opportunities available by offering hands-on activities, community service projects, and informational sessions on different STEAM careers. Ian Adams commented on how these experiences have been transformative in his career planning, explaining, "It's a good opportunity to help me explore different career options as I am getting to that point in life" (Adams-Hudson Family). This comment highlights the program's role in providing career insights and encouraging students to think critically about their personal goals and professional aspirations.

The Value of Tailored Sessions in Specialized Fields. While the program was widely recognized for supporting college and career preparation, a common suggestion was to introduce more specialized sessions within specific S.T.E.A.M. areas, such as physics, chemistry, and engineering. These sessions were requested to deepen student engagement and allow a more focused exploration of their areas of interest. Participants noted that while exposure to general S.T.E.A.M. topics is beneficial, a tailored approach would be even more effective for students with specific academic or career goals.

The interviews also revealed that some participants would benefit from additional opportunities to connect with professionals or mentors in their areas of interest. For example, a parent, Charlotte Williams, recalled the impact of college tours and field-specific mentoring sessions she experienced as a former program participant, recommending similar experiences for current students to foster more profound, more individualized learning (Smith Family). Mentorship and field-specific learning could support academic growth and offer students a clearer sense of the day-to-day realities of S.T.E.A.M careers, thus aiding in career decision-making.

Benefits of College Essay Writing and Application Guidance. As another feature of the Fast Forward program, the program offered resources for preparing applications and essays for college. Both parents and students remarked on the importance of these sessions for helping students write a strong college essay and organize their application materials. For many participants, college essays were initially a daunting aspect of the application process. Still, the Fast Forward program broke down the process, helping students develop authentic narratives highlighting their strengths and goals.

Janet Hudson, a parent, emphasized the importance of these resources for students just beginning their college journey, explaining that knowing how to "prepare for college in terms of forms, application, things like that" was a significant value of the program (Adams-Hudson Family). The structured support made the application process more manageable and built students' confidence in their ability to present themselves effectively to colleges.

Balancing Program Commitment with Other Activities. Balancing participation in the Investing Now program with students' existing commitments emerged as a significant challenge for many families. The program's structure, which often included weekend sessions, was beneficial for some students but created conflicts for others already involved in various extracurricular, academic, and personal activities. For many students, particularly those engaged in rigorous school schedules and other demanding commitments, the program's time requirements could feel burdensome, potentially impacting their engagement and overall experience.

For example, Isaiah Baker explained that weekend events, while valuable, sometimes conflicted with other responsibilities, noting, "A lot of times it is somewhat mandatory to stay in the program, so it can sometimes eat up your schedule" (Baker-Williams Family). This statement highlights the challenges students face who must navigate multiple commitments simultaneously, often juggling academics, sports, and family obligations in addition to Fast Forward requirements. While Isaiah's experience underscores the importance of consistent program participation, it suggests that current scheduling may inadvertently strain students with other fixed commitments, such as weekend sports tournaments or family events.

Families emphasized that while they appreciated the program's value, they would benefit from greater flexibility in attendance requirements. Multiple families echoed this feedback, suggesting that offering additional scheduling options, such as mid-week sessions, could alleviate these challenges. For instance, Jace Abreu proposed a shift toward weekday programming, explaining, "It would be better during the week… because my brain was already in the mode of being in school and working" (Abreu Family). Jace's comment points to a practical solution that could improve accessibility for students who may find it easier to engage in program activities on weekdays when they are already in an academic mindset rather than interrupting weekend rest or other obligations.

Beyond weekday scheduling, other families proposed flexible make-up sessions to accommodate students with unavoidable conflicts. Parents expressed that make-up sessions could reduce stress around program attendance, allowing students to maintain their commitment to Fast Forward and their involvement in other activities without feeling penalized. Janet Hudson mentioned that having structured make-up sessions could "make it easier for families… making it more simplified" for students to fulfill program requirements despite competing priorities (Adam-Hudson Family).

This theme also revealed insights into the broader value of time management as a life skill. Some parents viewed the balancing act as a positive learning opportunity where students could develop skills in managing multiple responsibilities. Toni Smith, for example, remarked that her daughter's participation in the program alongside other commitments was beneficial because it encouraged them to "learn how to balance their time and activities" (Sharif Family). For these families, the program's time demands,

though challenging, also served to strengthen students' abilities to organize their schedules and make decisions about prioritizing their responsibilities.

Family Engagement and Support. Family engagement surfaced as a key theme in the Fast Forward program discussions. While parents valued the communication and support offered by the program, they expressed a desire for more active involvement in their children's college preparation journey. Many families attended orientation sessions and appreciated the program's consistent updates on events, deadlines, and requirements. This foundational communication was critical to keeping parents informed; however, families indicated they wanted more direct engagement opportunities that would empower them to support their children more effectively, particularly in the college application process.

Parents widely endorsed the idea of family workshops focused on topics like financial aid, scholarships, and college applications. Often complex and overwhelming for first-time college applicants, these topics were seen as critical areas where families could benefit from targeted guidance. Toni Smith explained, "If there were a parent portion or more parent engagement or involvement, I would hope... workshops for parents on preparing for college in terms of forms, application, things like that" (Smith Family). Such workshops would educate parents about college admissions and equip them with tools to navigate the intricacies of financial aid and scholarship opportunities. This level of involvement was seen as especially important for parents from underrepresented backgrounds who may not have had firsthand experience with college applications. Providing these resources could strengthen parents' roles as active supporters of their children's college aspirations.

In addition to workshops, parents proposed collaborative resources that would allow them to track their children's college preparation activities alongside program advisors. Janet Hudson suggested creating a shared resource, such as a college-prep tracker or a Google sheet, where program staff and parents could collectively monitor student progress. Hudson explained, "It would be cool for it to be a shared tool that I, as a parent, can see and you can see, and we discuss the progress together" (Adam-Hudson Family). This shared document would help foster a cooperative approach, allowing families and program advisors to align on goals, track essential milestones, and communicate about any challenges or upcoming tasks.

The proposed shared resource could also offer benefits beyond tracking tasks and deadlines. Parents expressed that a college-prep tracker could include customized recommendations for each grade level, such as when to take standardized tests, draft college essays, and begin the FAFSA application. For families, such a tool could reduce confusion around the college preparation timeline, ensuring they know which tasks are most urgent at each stage. Additionally, the shared resource would give parents a clearer sense of how Fast Forward directly supports their child, allowing them to see the student's progress through the various program components, like tutoring, advisory sessions, and S.T.E.A.M. career exploration events.

Moreover, families believed that such structured engagement could strengthen the sense of community within the program. The family workshops and shared resources were tools for individual support and potential venues for building a network among families with shared experiences. Parents felt that having spaces where they could connect would foster a stronger community and create a support system beyond the program. These interactions could allow parents to share advice, resources, and

encouragement, enhancing the program's community impact and families' confidence in navigating the college journey.

Opportunities for Program Improvement. Participants provided insightful feedback on enhancing the Investing Now program's curriculum and structure to address its diverse student population's varied needs and interests. Families and students recognized the program's strengths in preparing students for college and career exploration in S.T.E.A.M. However, they also identified several areas where modifications could increase student engagement, broaden access, and enrich learning experiences.

Expanding Specialized S.T.E.A.M Content. A consistent student recommendation [MW8] was to incorporate more specialized content within S.T.E.A.M, particularly in physics, chemistry, and engineering. While the program provides a broad foundation in S.T.E.A.M fields, some students expressed a desire for deeper, more targeted instruction that would allow them to delve further into areas aligned with their academic interests and career goals. Isaiah Baker, for instance, articulated a need for "more science and math courses or lessons," emphasizing that specific content in physics and engineering would satisfy his intellectual curiosity and support his aspirations in these fields (Baker-Williams Family).

This feedback points to an opportunity for the program to provide subject-specific workshops, courses, or even project-based learning experiences that align with students' academic pursuits. Such sessions could be delivered by collaborating with local university departments, professionals in relevant fields, or through hands-on lab experiences that mirror real-world applications of these subjects. Offering specialized

S.T.E.A.M content could help students explore their passions in a more focused manner, thereby increasing both their engagement with the program and their preparation for college-level courses in these fields.

Survey responses further highlight students' and families' desire to have more specialized S.T.E.A.M. opportunities. The following table presents data that reflects the learning experiences of students within the Fast Forward program.

Figure 2:

Answers to Question Six

Q8 - Investing Now is preparing me for my post-secondary journey.

Strongly agree	66.67%
Somewhat agree	16.67%
Neither agree nor disagree	16.67%
Somewhat disagree	0.00%
Strongly disagree	0.00%

■ Percentage
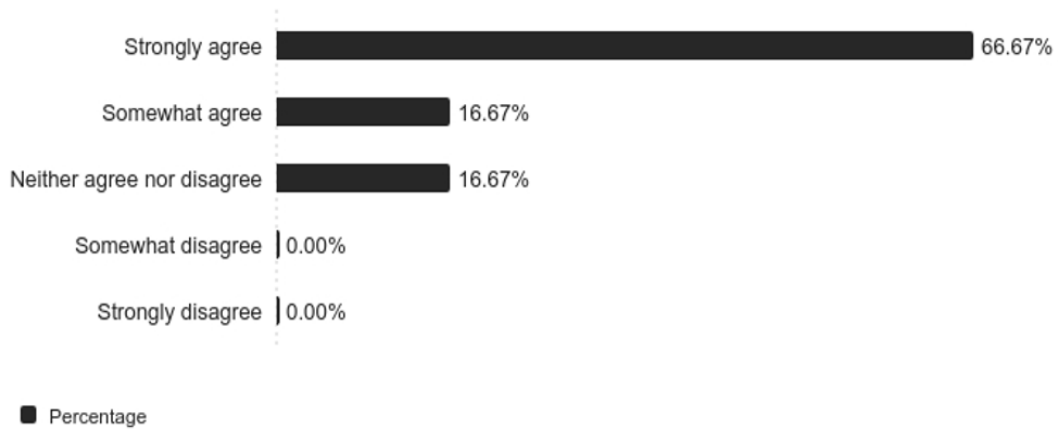
Increasing Outreach and Accessibility. Another improvement participants

suggested was expanding the program's outreach efforts to increase awareness and access

within more schools and communities. Families feel that access to the program might be

limited for some students who would benefit greatly but may not be aware of the

opportunity. Toni Smith recommended that Fast Forward engage more directly with local

schools by partnering with school counselors and hosting informational sessions for

students and families. She suggested, "Maybe going into the schools and speaking

directly with the counselors or the students... so they know this resource is available

(Smith Family).

Expanding outreach could involve setting up informational meetings at high

schools or community centers, especially in underrepresented neighborhoods. It could

also include hosting virtual open houses or using social media to reach a broader

audience. By raising the program's visibility, Fast Forward could ensure that more

students have access to its resources, potentially expanding its impact and reaching those

who may not have previously considered college or careers in S.T.E.A.M.

Summary of Findings

The Fast Forward Program was created to provide an opportunity for underserved

and underrepresented youth to be exposed to S.T.E.M related majors and career fields

(Gray-Roncal et al., 2018). This has primarily been done through workshops, tutoring,

and academic advising. Throughout the past two years, the program has expanded to

include the arts as well as SAT Prep and on-campus experiences such as Step Shows and

Sporting Events. Through the expansion of offerings and opportunities, students have

been able to receive a more well-rounded perspective of college, specifically Lion

University.

My research questions are grounded in learning about the experience of the families of color that participated in the program and whether it is preparing them for their post-secondary journey.

Research Question 1. How do families of color participating in Fast Forward at Lion University perceive the effectiveness of college preparation courses and career counseling in preparing them for post-secondary education or the workforce? Overall, the family participants expressed that they felt the program was meeting its intended goals. Their student or students felt supported, the workshops were engaging, and if their student was a senior, they felt prepared for the next steps of their academic journey.

Although the families are mostly pleased with the program and its offerings, all the adult participants expressed a desire to learn and expand their knowledge of the college/ post-secondary process, regardless of their degree attainment. Currently, families are invited to workshops that include financial aid and admissions representatives.

Research Question 2. What challenges and barriers do families of color face in accessing and benefiting from post-secondary readiness programs, and how do they impact their overall academic success in transitioning from high school to post-secondary education or the workforce? The families that I spoke with reported that the largest barrier they had was competing priorities. Most students who are participating in Fast Forward also have sports, after school, or some other enrichment activity that they engage in. That isn't surprising because high-achieving students are often engaged in many activities (Roderick et al., 2009)

The families did explain that this barrier hasn't impacted their academic success, but it has impacted meeting all the requirements of the program and receiving the incentives or recognition for active participation.

This led to the suggestion of increasing the number of offerings or making workshops or some events virtual. Some families even suggested more weekend programs as they do not interfere as much with the day-to-day schedules students and families already have.

Based on my research findings, I aim to create learning modules for our families that include our current program offerings and that will engage the adults in our students' lives. Through these modules, families will learn more about the college and post-secondary process. This will include, how to select a major of interest, how to help select a college that is a good "match" for your students, application do's and don'ts, and much more.

By creating these modules, families will have access to important information that helps their student navigate their post-secondary journey as well as stay up to date with what their students are learning in their advising and in some of the workshops. I look forward to using these findings to demonstrate how I create an action plan that can be used within the Fast Forward Program to enhance its efficacy and longevity.

CHAPTER THREE

DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTION PLAN

This action plan, deeply rooted in my research findings, is a direct reflection of the Educational Opportunity Center's (EOC) mission and goals. The EOC, established in January 2022, is dedicated to creating equitable pathways to college, including, but not limited to, the University of Pittsburgh (Education Outreach Center, n.d.). This mission is a shared commitment that we all strive to uphold.

Since the EOC took over, the Investing Now program has undergone a massive overhaul, and creating a Family Transition Toolkit would continue the momentum of the center. Based on the findings of my study, most families requested that there be more support for families in supporting their students in navigating their post-secondary journey. For example, Mrs. Abreu suggested that the information be broken down into grade-level-specific programs to be more tailored to student and family needs. Additionally, Ms. Smith and Ms. Williams both shared sentiments of wanting a "parent university" or "parent workshops" that could be accessible to them when necessary.

Our hope is that through this platform, families will feel more supported, and students will feel more prepared to embark on their post-secondary journeys. To ensure these goals are met, the other members of the EOC staff and I will engage in an Action Research Cycle to ensure that we observe and reflect on our plan and adjust as needed (Giancola, 2014). As our program grows and we get new students, we must adapt and change to meet the needs of our students. Lastly, the timeline for the plan is set to begin in June and will launch in September, as the Toolkit will begin to be used for the Fall term. Following the completion of the Fall term, there will be a time to reflect and adjust so we can begin the cycle again for Spring 2026.

Table 1:

Outline of Action Research Plan for EOC and Investing Now Program Improvements

Objectives and Outcomes (What)	Tasks (How)	Person(s) (Who)	Time (When)	Location (Where)	Resources	Funds
Objective 1: Develop a Family Transition Toolkit curriculum that can used to support families in navigating their students' post-secondary transition. Outcome: Fast Forward families will be more prepared to support their students' transition after high school, and students will be more prepared to navigate college or careers.	a. Meet with the EOC Team to discuss topics for the toolkit curriculum. b. Identify themes/topics for the toolkit by grade level. c. Organize themes/ topics into four modules with two lessons in each. d. Create a check for understanding and resources that align with modules. e. Share modules with families to begin using with their students.	a. Lena-Associate Director of the EOC b. Anika – Pathway Development Manager of the EOC c. Social Work Intern d. Student Workers (2) e. 3-5 University Stakeholder groups (OAFA, Student Success Hub, Residence Services, etc.)	a. Initial Planning meeting (June 2025) b. Weekly meetings with the EOC team to generate module/curriculum themes (1.5 hrs)- June 2025 and July 2025 c. Utilize the Canvas platform to build modules (August 2025) d. Launch toolkit (September 2025)	a. Planning meetings in person in the 19th-floor conference room b. Toolkit launch at family orientations online using Zoom and Campus in-person workshops	a. EOC team commitment b. Information from our University and Community Partners c. Canvas Platform for tool kit creation	a. $750 for the meals provided at each of the in-person launch events (2)

Action Plan – Objectives & Outcomes

The primary goal of this action plan is to develop a Family Transition Toolkit curriculum [MW2] that will support students and families as they transition from high school to college or career pathways. The online platform will serve as a space where families can access modules and resources that are tailored to their grade level and post-secondary journey needs. Families will access the toolkit on Canvas through their desktop or mobile device. The intended outcome is to ensure that all Fast Forward families are prepared to assist their students and gain the skills necessary to manage their post-secondary transitions smoothly and independently.

Harper and Sanders (2020) emphasize the importance of family engagement in college readiness. They highlight that students with strong family support systems exhibit increased confidence and success in their postsecondary journey.

Action Plan – Tasks

It is important to follow a series of structured tasks to achieve the objectives, each ensuring that the plan is executed thoroughly. The first step involves gathering the EOC team to identify relevant topics for the toolkit curriculum. These topics will be generated from best practices for postsecondary readiness. Once the key themes and topics are identified, they will be categorized by grade level to ensure a gradual learning process. The content will then be organized into four modules containing two lessons.

After this, the team will create assessment tools and additional resources that reinforce the material presented in the modules. These tools include check-for-understanding exercises, interactive activities, and supplementary guidance materials. Once the curriculum is finalized, the toolkit will be shared with families. The rollout of

the toolkit will be done through orientation sessions that will provide families with hands-on training on how to utilize it.

This process follows an iterative action research cycle, ensuring adjustments are made based on feedback and observations (Giancola, 2014). The team will also assess the content to enhance accessibility for families.

Action Plan – People

Implementing the Family Transition Toolkit involves diverse stakeholders; together, they ensure a collaborative and multidisciplinary approach. The key personnel include:

- **Lena** – Associate Director of the EOC, overseeing the initiative and ensuring alignment with program objectives.

- **Anika** – Pathway Development Manager, responsible for designing and structuring the toolkit curriculum.

- **Social Work Intern** – Providing insights into family engagement strategies and support mechanisms.

- **Student Workers (2)** – Assisting in creating content, organizing materials, and gathering family feedback.

- **University Stakeholders (3-5 groups)** – Including representatives from the **Office of Admissions and Financial Aid (OAFA), Student Success Hub, and Residence Services**. These groups will contribute expertise, resources, and guidance to ensure the toolkit meets institutional standards and addresses the needs of incoming students.

Through their collaborative efforts, the toolkit reflects best practices for supporting students' financial, academic, and social transition.

Action Plan – Time

This action plan portion explains the process's structured timeline, which ensures the toolkit's systemic development and implementation. The timeline aligns with families and students during the school year to ensure they are supported through each critical step. The key to successful timeline implementation is to be systemic, sustainable, and scalable.

Action Plan – Location

To maximize accessibility and engagement, the toolkit will be implemented using a combination of in-person and virtual platforms. The planning meetings will be in-person at the EOC's office conference room, allowing for a collaborative space and discussion among team members. The toolkit will be available online via the Canvas platform, but the launch will occur via Zoom and in person during specified workshops. Providing a hybrid model for the launch will support families with varying schedules and needs.

Action Plan – Resources & Funds

Resources and funding have been allocated to ensure the toolkit's effectiveness and accessibility. The EOC team plays a critical role in this initiative by dedicating their time and expertise to developing, refining, and implementing the toolkit. Their commitment ensures the curriculum remains relevant and aligned with families' needs. Additionally, the university and community partners provide insights and best practices.

The Canvas platform allows for maximum accessibility for families to engage remotely and conveniently. Furthermore, the allocation of the $750 designated for meals at the in-person launch events fosters a welcoming atmosphere for families.

Analysis of   Implementation Change and Leadership Practice

Organizational Change and Leadership Approach

The development of the Family Transition Toolkit represents a structured and strategic change initiative within the EOC. The implementation, however, reflects adaptive leadership, which emphasizes responsiveness to the needs of students and families (Heifetz et al., 2009). Additionally, the action plan aligns with the mission of equitable access to postsecondary opportunities and shifts the approach from a generalized to a more family-inclusive model (Harper & Sanders, 2020).

Collaborative Leadership

The Toolkit's execution engages university stakeholders, social work professionals, the EOC team, and student workers. This inclusive approach fosters collective decision-making and shared responsibility. Collaborative leadership enhances team members' learning and innovation, allowing them to contribute unique perspectives and problem-solving strategies (Senge, 2006).

To maintain collaboration within the team, we will meet weekly to plan the various stages of the toolkit. During those meetings, Anika and I will support the team in selecting topics for modules based on the topics we cover with students in their workshops and post-secondary best practices. As we build each module, a member of the team and or university partners will support us with feedback on content and accessibility.

Through this process, our goal is to complete a platform that we will launch with our families in the Fall and continue to improve and build as the program grows.

Anticipated Results of Action/Intervention/Change Process

Increased Family Engagement

Through the toolkit, EOC families will be better equipped to support their student's postsecondary journey, ultimately leading to more confidence and success. When families are given guidance and resources tailored to their students, they can better navigate challenges and advocate for their students' needs (Harper & Sanders, 2020). By engaging families, the EOC taps into familial capital directly. When institutions recognize and build upon the strengths of families, students gain stronger foundations for academic persistence (Yosso, 2005). In addition, families who are given tools and resources for better understanding college systems and advocating for their students gain navigational capital (Perna & Titus, 2005). By taking this approach, the EOC reinforces the belief that families are not barriers to success but valuable assets to a student's educational journey (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001).

More Personalized Student Support

By structuring content according to grade level, the students will receive guidance appropriate to their needs, making college and career preparation proactive rather than reactive (Perna & Thomas, 2008). College preparation programs that provide consistent, structured, and scaffolded support help students develop the resilience needed to persist through academic challenges. The toolkit is designed to do this and create resistant capital for families and students. Resistant capital refers to the ability to challenge inequitable systems and educate students about structural barriers they can overcome with appropriate strategies. (Yosso, 2005). Furthermore, when students are guided through grade-specific milestones, they are better positioned to take ownership of their educational trajectory (Conley, 2010).

Enhanced Institutional Collaboration

The involvement of various university partners will strengthen the path for pre-collegiate students and support alignment between high school and college expectations (Tinto, 2012). Social capital, introduced by Yosso (2005), is particularly relevant to this context since institutional collaboration provides students and families with a network of support, mentorship, and insider knowledge about colleges. Building relationships with university staff, admissions professionals, and faculty members helps students and their families navigate the complexities of higher education (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Lastly, by embedding institutional collaboration into post-secondary readiness initiatives, higher education institutions expand access to knowledge and create a more inclusive process for students (Tinto, 2012).

Implications for Practice

Scalability

The Family Transition Toolkit has the potential to be scaled beyond its initial target audience. Specifically, it could support students pursuing vocational or technical career pathways. According to Carnevale et al. (2012), an increasing number of students are now pursuing alternative pathways such as vocational training, technical certificates, and apprenticeships, so expanding the toolkit in this way would allow for more inclusivity.

This expansion could include career exploration modules that provide detailed information about apprenticeships, trade schools, and other options, in hopes of helping students understand their postsecondary educational choices (Rosenbaum et al., 2015). Additionally, the modules may include financial aid guidance for non-traditional

programs. Many students are given galactic guidance on funding options for career-focused education (Perna, 2006).

Lastly, expanding partnerships with local unions and workforce development programs can continue to expose students and families to alternative pathways and create mentorship and internship opportunities (Holzer, 2019).

Digital Accessibility and Multilingual Support

Providing digital accessibility and multiple formats for the Family Transition Toolkit is essential for meeting the diverse learning needs of students and families (Baum & McPherson, 2019). Many students and parents, particularly those from marginalized or multilingual backgrounds, face significant barriers in accessing college readiness resources due to linguistic and technological inequities (González et al., 2020). In addition to making the Toolkit available in various digital formats, the program ensures that all families have access to the materials in the form that best suits their learning preferences and technology access (Means & Toyama, 2014).

Increasingly, immigrant and first-generation families speak a primary language other than English, making language accessibility an equity issue (Flores & Drake, 2014). Without multilingual resources, families may have difficulty understanding financial aid processes, college application requirements, and student support services, negatively impacting students' ability to navigate postsecondary transitions (Callahan & Gándara, 2014). Expanding the Toolkit to include translations in commonly spoken languages, culturally relevant examples, and multilingual video content can enhance families' engagement and ability to advocate for their students (García & Wei, 2014). Collaborative efforts with bilingual educators, cultural organizations, and interpreters can

also improve language accessibility and facilitate communication between institutions and families (Zong & Batalova, 2015).

Implication for future research

Implementing the Family Transition Toolkit raises several areas for future research, particularly regarding equitable college access, culturally responsive advising, digital inclusion, and long-term student success outcomes. As the toolkit expands and adapts to the needs of diverse student populations, further investigation is needed to assess its effectiveness, scalability, and impact on underrepresented communities. Below are some key areas for future research:

1. Measuring the Effectiveness of Family Engagement in Postsecondary Transitions

While research suggests that family involvement positively influences student success (Harper & Sanders, 2020; Perna & Titus, 2005), more empirical studies are needed to determine how structured interventions like the Family Transition Toolkit impact student persistence, college enrollment, and degree completion rates. Future research should:

● Conduct longitudinal studies tracking students who participate in toolkit-based programs versus those who do not.

● Investigate which toolkit components (e.g., financial literacy, career exploration, and mentorship) have the most significant impact on student outcomes.

● Examine how different levels of parental engagement influence students from varying socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

2. Examining the Role of Cultural Community Wealth in College Readiness

Programs

Using Yosso's (2005) Cultural Community Wealth (CCW) framework, future

research should explore how asset-based approaches influence the design and

effectiveness of college access programs. Studies could:

● Analyze how the toolkit can leverage aspirational, familial, social, navigational,

resistant, and linguistic capital.

● Investigate the extent to which students and families recognize and apply their

cultural wealth to navigate postsecondary transitions.

● Assess how culturally responsive college readiness materials impact student

motivation, confidence, and self-advocacy.

3. Digital Equity and Accessibility in College Readiness Programs

As the toolkit integrates digital learning resources, it is essential to examine how

much students and families can access and utilize these materials effectively (Means et

al., 2014). Future research should:

● Investigate digital literacy levels among families in low-income and

multilingual communities and how these skills impact engagement with online

college readiness tools (González et al., 2020).

● Examine the effectiveness of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategies in

improving accessibility for students with disabilities and diverse learning needs

(CAST, 2018).

● Explore the role of mobile technology and social media in expanding college readiness support to historically marginalized students (Baum & McPherson, 2019).

4. The Impact of Vocational Pathways and Alternative Postsecondary Options

Many existing college access programs focus on traditional four-year institutions. However, there is a growing need to examine how vocational education, apprenticeships, and two-year colleges fit into college readiness frameworks (Carnevale et al., 2012). Future research should:

● Investigate how toolkit-based resources can better integrate career pathways for technical education students.

● Explore the perceptions and experiences of students choosing non-traditional post-secondary routes such as: trade schools, apprenticeships, a gap year, the military, etc., particularly those from low-income backgrounds.

● Assess whether vocational and workforce development partnerships enhance postsecondary transitions for students not planning to pursue a four-year degree (Rosenbaum et al., 2015).

5. Institutional Collaboration and Policy Development

Future research should also examine how institutional partnerships between K-12 schools, universities, and community organizations impact student success (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Areas of study could include:

● The effectiveness of cross-sector collaborations in providing comprehensive student support.

● How policy changes at the state and federal levels influence the scalability of college readiness interventions.

● The role of higher education institutions in designing inclusive, asset-based advising models for first-generation and underrepresented students (Tinto, 2012).

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into how organizations can better support students and families in postsecondary transitions, mainly through structured, asset-based interventions like the Family Transition Toolkit. By emphasizing family engagement, digital accessibility, and cultural responsiveness, the study offers a scalable framework that can be adapted by other organizations facing similar challenges. Educational institutions, nonprofits, and community-based college readiness programs can apply these findings to develop holistic, family-centered strategies rather than relying solely on student-facing interventions. Organizations can bridge persistent access gaps and empower students and families in the postsecondary journey by integrating culturally responsive advising, multilingual resources, and digital equity principles.

Several recurring challenges in college access and readiness programs are addressed in this study. One key issue is the limited engagement of families in postsecondary planning, as many college readiness models assume students will navigate the process independently. This study reinforces the need for structured family engagement efforts that recognize the power of familial capital (Yosso, 2005). Additionally, traditional college readiness approaches often adopt a deficit-based perspective, positioning underrepresented students as lacking resources rather than acknowledging their cultural strengths. By centering Yosso's (2005) Cultural Community

Wealth framework, this study challenges such narratives and advocates for an asset-based approach.

Additionally, digital, and linguistic barriers hinder access to critical college readiness information for many students and families. The study underscores the importance of providing accessible, multilingual, and multimodal resources to ensure that all students, regardless of background, can engage with the toolkit (Baum & McPherson, 2019). Finally, the study highlights the lack of alignment between high school and postsecondary education systems, emphasizing the need for stronger institutional collaboration to create seamless student transitions (Tinto, 2012).

To advance this area of research, organizations should consider implementing longitudinal studies that track student and family engagement over multiple years to assess the long-term impact of family-inclusive college readiness programs (Harper & Sanders, 2020). Additionally, further exploration into the role of technology in college readiness, including mobile applications, AI-driven advising, and social media engagement, can enhance outreach and accessibility for underrepresented students (Means et al., 2014). Another critical area for research is the need to investigate alternative postsecondary pathways, such as vocational, technical, and apprenticeship programs, to ensure that students pursuing nontraditional paths receive equitable support (Carnevale et al., 2012). Moreover, assessing the policy implications of family engagement in college planning could provide insights into how state and federal policies impact access to culturally responsive advising models (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

This study directly responds to the problem of limited family engagement and institutional barriers in postsecondary transitions by offering a structured, research-informed solution through the Family Transition Toolkit. It reaffirms the importance of

family engagement and provides a practical framework for scaffolding parental involvement across different grade levels. Additionally, by applying Yosso's (2005) asset-based framework, the study challenges deficit narratives and positions students and families as holders of valuable cultural capital. The research also offers actionable strategies for institutions to make resources more accessible, equitable, and linguistically inclusive. By bridging research and practice, the study presents a scalable and adaptable model that can be implemented by other organizations facing similar challenges. These findings lay the groundwork for continued innovation in college readiness programming, encouraging institutions to co-design initiatives with families, embrace digital transformation, and expand pathways beyond traditional four-year institutions. Equitable college access can become a more inclusive and culturally responsive reality through this lens.

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Project Title: The Impact of Pre Collegiate Programs for Students of Color

Target Participant Group: Family Members of 9th Grade Fast Foward Participants

Opening

        Thank you for participating in this research study, which is intended to better understand your perspectives about the Investing Now program coordinated by the Educational Outreach Center at the University of Pittsburgh. Our goal is to improve your experience within the Fast Forward program as your student transitions to and through college.

        This group interview should last around 90 minutes and will be recorded. It will consist of a series of questions that ask for your thoughts about Fast Forward generally, how the program has impacted your student's preparedness toward their post-secondary journey, and opportunities for improvement at the Fast Forward program.

        With your rights as a study participant, you are not required to answer questions. You may pass on any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. You are free to stop the interview at any time. There is no penalty for discontinuing participation. Any information you share will be kept confidential, and you will not be identified. Also, any names of people and/or places will be anonymized.

Do you have any questions before we proceed?

Question Set 1 - Fast Forward Generally

This first set of questions asks about your thoughts on Fast Forward generally.

1. **How would you describe you experience with the Fast Forward program?**
    a. Probe: What has contributed to your experience with the program?
7. **Why did you enroll your student into the Fast Forward program?**
    a. Probe: What are the benefits? drawbacks?

Question Set 2 - Program-Specific Thoughts

This next set of questions asks about your families participation in the Fast Forward program.

Has your student been able to obtain active participation in the program? Explain

how they have been able to achieve it.

a.   Probe:Have their been any barriers?
b.   Probe: Has the EOC aided in your student achieving this goal?

4.   The Fast Forward program was is a college preparatory program supporting rising 9ᵗʰ through 12ᵗʰ grade students. It was created to stimulate, support, and recognize the high academic performance of pre-college students from groups that are historically underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, art and mathematics majors and careers. Are the staff of the EOC meeting these goals?
a.   Probe:What do you think has led to the successful meeting of these goals?
b.   Probe: Can you share a specific example that applies to your student and family.

5.   Family engagement, is key to ensuring this program works well for students. Explain how the EOC has engaged you and your family in the Fast Forward program.
a.   Probe: What does family engagement mean to you? Can your provide examples?

Question Set 3 - Fast Forward

The final questions asks about your thoughts improvements that can be made to the Fast Forward program and staff at the EOC.

6.   Share some improvements that would benefit the Fast Foward program and it's longevity at the EOC.
a.   Probe: What is the impact of the improvements?
b.   Probe: Why do you think there are no improvements needed?

Closing

7.   **Is there anything else you want to share about the Fast Forward program or the EOC that hasn't been discussed?**

Likert Scale:
Strongly Agree
Somewhat Agree
Neither Agree or Disagree
Somewhat Disagree
Strongly Disagree

1. The workshops this semester were engaging.
2. The facilitators of the workshop were knowledgeable about the topic presented.
3. I learned something new this semester about a college major or career field.
4. I will be returning next semester to the Fast Forward program.
5. The expectations of the Fast Forward are clear.
6. I know who to contact when I need support or have questions.
7. The Fast Forward program is preparing me for my post-secondary journey.
8. I would recommend the Fast Forward program to a friend or family member.