

# ***Trying to Bend the Bars of the Iron Cage: A Case Study of a K-16 Partnership***

By Lisa Tripp, Ph.D., UCACCORD Dissertation Fellowship Recipient

## **Synopsis**

This study examines a cluster of school-university (K-16) partnership activities that were developed by UCSD's Center for Research in Educational Equity, Assessment, and Teaching Excellence (CREATE), as part of the University of California (UC) effort to meet the challenge of developing a diverse study body in the absence of affirmative action. The partnership activities examined in the study aimed to improve the academic resources and school culture of a predominantly Latino, high poverty middle school south of San Diego, California, in the US-Mexico border region. The study uses participant observation, action research, and other qualitative methods to reveal both the promise and pitfalls of K-16 partnerships. It contributes to our understanding of using K-16 partnerships as a strategy for addressing needed educational changes in low-performing schools. It demonstrates that a variety of practical and ideological challenges must be overcome to achieve effective multi-institutional collaboration, and that such efforts are necessarily long-term and labor-intensive. *The study concludes that under the right conditions, K-16 partnerships can be a viable and important strategy for promoting equity-minded school reform and educational change.* The following includes background information, description of the study, discussion of findings, and pertinent recommendations that can be drawn from the research.

## **K-16 Partnerships Respond to a Crisis in UC Student Eligibility**

The University of California has a mission to achieve a diverse student body, representative of the state's population. It is well known that current enrollments fall well short of this goal. Deep inequities exist in terms of which students are even *eligible* for admission to the UC. According to one study on the high school class of 1996, for example, only 2.8% of African American and 3.8% of Chicano and Latino students were eligible for the UC, compared to 12.7% of White and 30.0% of Asian students. The study projected these trends over the next decade and found that if current population and eligibility trends continued, by 2008, Latinos and African Americans would make up nearly half of California's high school graduates, but only 17% of the UC eligibility pool.<sup>1</sup>

Since the 1995 ban on using affirmative action in UC admissions, UC Outreach has increasingly been called on to help correct these inequities in eligibility before students graduate from high school. In 1997, the UC adopted an extensive and unprecedented plan—and greatly augmented budget—for expanding the University's Outreach programs. The plan included a new institutional role for the UC: to work directly and in partnership with low performing schools throughout the state in an effort to improve K-12 public education and to “improve opportunities for California students in disadvantaged circumstances to achieve eligibility and to enroll at UC campuses.”<sup>2</sup> This plan was implemented throughout the UC and, within its first two years of implementation, led to the development of approximately 250 formal partnership relationships between the UC and some of California's lowest performing schools.

## **A Case Study of a K-16 Partnership: The South Bay Project**

In 1997, CREATE was established at UCSD to develop and oversee the university's K-16 partnership activities. This study examines a cluster of these activities, known as the *South Bay (SBAY) Project*, which were initiated by CREATE in the Fall of 1998. The SBAY Project consists of a collaboration between UCSD and a variety of educational institutions located in San Diego's southernmost part of the

---

<sup>1</sup> The study was conducted by the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC), and quoted in Assembly Budget Subcommittee (2001); as well as in University of California, Educational Outreach (2001).

<sup>2</sup> Outreach Task Force (1997).

county: a community center, elementary school, middle school, high school, and community college. Children participating in the SBAY Project are predominantly Mexican origin and low-income. Many are Spanish-language dominant and English is their second language. Many of the community college students who participate in the program are underrepresented minority students<sup>3</sup> from similar backgrounds.

This study closely examines SBAY Project partnership-related activities as they evolved in the context of the middle school over the first three years of program design and implementation (Fall 1998-Fall 2001). My involvement in the SBAY Project spanned the third year of this process, first as a participant observer and then also as an action researcher. In addition, I gathered information about the first two years of program development through interviews with CREATE and school staff and through review of ethnographic field notes written by CREATE staff and undergraduate student participants. The study documents the tension between theory and practice in the development and evolution of the SBAY Project.

The SBAY Project at the middle school was designed as an after-school, computer-integrated, academic enrichment activity. A teacher and staff member from the school worked with CREATE researchers to design, oversee, and staff the program. Principal after-school activities included students learning basic keyboarding skills, using educational computer games to practice math skills, doing Internet research and a variety of computer-based homework projects, designing simple computer games with basic programming skills, and designing a *PowerPoint* style slide-show presentation about students' life histories and personal backgrounds. Several community college (CC) students participated in these activities as active tutors, mentors, and "more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978) to the middle school students. CC students also participated in the activities as learners themselves, studying child development principles and field research techniques as part of a CC course taught collaboratively between CC and UCSD professors.

### **The SBAY Project: A Multifaceted Approach to Solving Educational Disparities**

For CREATE, the SBAY Project represents a multifaceted, long-term strategy (described below) to improve the educational opportunities and educational achievement of underrepresented minority students in "low performing" schools. CREATE's approach is informed by research that has consistently demonstrated broad, class and race-based inequity in the education of students of poor, working class, and underrepresented minority backgrounds. In "low performing" schools serving high percentages of underrepresented minority students, for example, constraints such as academic tracking practices, inadequately trained teachers, low teaching standards, and negative, often race-based assumptions about student ability are typically widespread and institutionalized (Oakes et al., 1992). In these contexts, students are likely to receive a "lower-tracked" curriculum that is more remedial in nature, involve more decoding activities, and more greatly emphasize classroom control and discipline (Anyon, 1980; Cazden, 1988; Haycock, 1997; Oakes et al., 1992). For a variety of reasons, the students that come to these schools are often years below grade level, demoralized by school, and disinterested in seemingly "academic" learning activities (Fine, 1991; Haycock, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Willis, 1977). They often react to this lower tracked curriculum and disciplinary emphasis by resisting school norms and teacher authority—perpetuating a cycle of being treated with disrespect and low expectations. Data collected in the course of this study (through teacher interviews and observations in the classroom and school) confirmed that the middle school in the study indeed exhibited these kinds of institutional practices and cultural tendencies common to low performing schools.

---

<sup>3</sup> The term underrepresented minority students refers to students that come from minority backgrounds that are underrepresented in the UC, primarily African Americans, Chicano/Latinos, and American Indians.

### *The South Bay Project as a Model for Promoting Equity-Minded School Reform*

An important way in which CREATE intended to use the SBAY Project as a strategy towards achieving educational equity was to use the process of working collaboratively with the participating schools as an opportunity to strengthen institutional ties and develop trusting relationships between CREATE and school personnel. According to CREATE's "theory of action," these rapport-building opportunities would be an important part of gaining the confidence and respect of school personnel necessary to be able to work jointly to address broader school problems and equity-minded reforms (Jones et al., 2002; Yonezawa et al., 2002).

### *The South Bay Project as a Model Academic Enrichment Activity*

Another important way in which CREATE intended to use the SBAY Project as a strategy towards achieving educational equity was to provide underrepresented minority students with academic enrichment activities that would be geared towards extending their time on academic tasks and providing them with a change in the culture and content of instruction from what they typically experience in their schools. CREATE's original plans for the SBAY project were to adapt to the middle school context an already-existing, successful model for after-school computer mediated activities that had been developed in community-based, club settings (known as the 5<sup>th</sup> Dimension). Research connected with this project had shown the benefits of combining play with academic learning in a low-surveillance, collaborative learning environment (Cole, 1996), and of enabling students to draw on their diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds as resources in the learning process (Vásquez, 2002). SBAY Project after-school activities were also theoretically informed by research demonstrating the benefits of providing traditionally "low achieving" and culturally diverse students with academically rigorous learning opportunities, as well as by providing these students with the additional support needed to succeed (Mehan et al., 1996).

### **SBAY Project Implementation Faces Practical and Ideological Challenges**

During the first two and a half years of SBAY Project development and implementation (Fall 1998 through Fall 2000), the CREATE staff and faculty involved in K-16 partnerships were extremely busy developing a wide variety of initiatives throughout San Diego County and were thus not in a position to provide an ongoing leadership role in the development of SBAY Project curriculum and pedagogy. Instead, a teacher and computer staff technician from the middle school played the primary roles in developing the program. As a result, the after-school program that developed during this period relied heavily on existing school resources and commonly accepted norms, and, in the process, duplicated many aspects of the already-available school environment. For example, in the after-school program, middle school personnel typically attempted to control student activities, movement, and noise levels similar to how they might in a classroom, using authoritarian and disciplinary tactics. They also relied heavily on curriculum that was more remedial in nature than academically rigorous, reflecting tendencies in the school towards giving most students a "lower-tracked" education.

When I began conducting research of SBAY Project activities at the middle school in the Fall 2000 semester, my observations confirmed that the program was not living up to CREATE's goals for creating model educational activities. For example, students were generally disengaged with computer activities that seemed "academic" (e.g. involving more demanding reading, writing, and math skills) and often acted antagonistically towards teachers and other adults helping in the program. Beginning in Spring 2001, CREATE staff and researchers began to work more intensively with middle school and community college students in an attempt to improve the structure of activities and the learning culture of the after-school program. I actively participated in these efforts as a participant observer and action researcher over a six-month period. During this time, CREATE's efforts included meeting periodically with middle school personnel (teachers, staff, and administrators) to discuss goals for the program and to plan,

develop, and review curriculum and site activities, as well as working more directly with middle school teachers and staff to help run the day-to-day site activities and to help mentor the involvement of the community college students involved in the project.

While the new role that CREATE personnel played in the SBAY Project helped affect changes in the program (described below) that were in the direction of CREATE's goals, these changes were constrained by both practical and ideological considerations. Practical constraints included such challenges as CREATE and middle school personnel having other full-time work responsibilities such that it was difficult for them to find the time to work together to develop new, innovative curriculum for the after-school context. These constraints also included community college students being spread between too many different research sites to be able to have a sustained, concentrated impact at the middle school.

Ideological constraints primarily included middle school and CREATE personnel holding conflicting beliefs and understandings about students and teaching. For instance, middle school personnel often disagreed with CREATE's goals of mixing learning with play, having a more open and collaborative learning environment, and encouraging less-hierarchical relationships between adults and young people. What's more, middle school personnel often advocated for and employed curriculum and teaching strategies that did not engage students in intellectually rigorous and academically meaningful activities, but instead emphasized more technical, remedial, and rote learning exercises. In this way, their beliefs and practices reflected tendencies common to low performing schools (described above).

Despite these constraints, as CREATE and middle school personnel worked more closely to develop the program together, improvements in the program were made that were in the direction of CREATE's goals. In the process, middle school personnel became more accepting of and interested in CREATE's approach to the program. Gradually, the culture and tone of the after-school program shifted, becoming less authoritarian, looser in structure, as well as more project-based and intellectually challenging. Interactions between middle school students, teachers, and community college students became more collaborative and incorporated higher levels of student engagement and interest in academic tasks. While there were notable limitations in what the program was able to achieve, by the time the study ended there were strong indications that the collaborative working relationships established between CREATE and middle school personnel would continue to facilitate additional program development.

### **K-16 Partnerships Can Contribute to Educational Equity**

This study supports CREATE's position that K-16 partnerships, under the right circumstances, can represent a useful strategy for promoting equity-minded school reform and educational change. The SBAY Project was successful, for example, at providing the middle school and its students with rich learning opportunities and resources, informed by research on educational equity (described earlier), that provide a useful and important contrast from what is typically available at the school. In this context, the program can be regarded as offering students and teachers an alternative model of how teaching and learning can be organized. The SBAY Project was also successful within the context of the broader partnership between UCSD and the middle school. For example, CREATE personnel were able to use the process of working with the school on the SBAY Project to help CREATE gain an accepted and appreciated presence at the school. The school administration was very pleased with SBAY Project activities, and CREATE's "Partnership Coordinators" were able to use this as a kind of "social capital" that facilitated their being able to work with the school administration toward achieving broader school improvement goals, such as implementing state standards, developing a college-going culture among the student-body, and facilitating effective professional development activities (Mehan et al., 1999 and 2000).

The long-term impact of the University of California's school-university partnership endeavors, such as the South Bay Project, will not be known for several years. This study indicates, however, that if

adequately developed and sustained, such partnership initiatives show potential for being able to contribute, in the long run, to two central goals established by the University of California Outreach Task Force (1997): 1) to contribute to the academic enrichment of UC Campuses through a diverse student body, and 2) to improve opportunities for California students in disadvantaged circumstances to achieve eligibility and to enroll at UC Campuses. This study also demonstrates that there is indeed an important and positive role that the UC can play in contributing to the long-term improvement and educational capacity of K-12 schools.

## **Recommendations from the Research**

- 1) ***K-16 partnerships should be recognized as a potentially viable and important strategy for promoting equity-minded school reform and educational change.*** This study supports findings that school practices and norms are deeply entrenched and resistant to change, but that under the right circumstances, change is possible (Mehan et al., 1996; Sarason, 1982; Tyack and Cuban, 1995). Achieving multi-institutional collaborations and equity-minded educational programs and school reforms should thus be recognized as a long, slow, and fragile process. Funding, research/evaluation, and policy related to K-16 partnerships should anticipate and plan for these challenges and not necessarily treat them as evidence of problems with the programs and schools involved.
- 2) ***To create effective school-university partnerships, the UC should commit adequate and consistent human and material resources sufficient and concentrated enough to address the challenges and barriers involved in such endeavors.*** For instance, in the case of the SBAY Project, this means that the university should plan to support the professional development, training, and curriculum development activities needed to establish and sustain an optimal educational activity. This also means that the university should ensure enough faculty leadership and community college student participation at any given school site to be able to maintain a strong, consistent, and enduring presence at that site.
  - a. This study cautions that the UC be careful not to spread its resources too thin or to develop partnerships beyond its capacity to sustain these partnerships.
  - b. This study urges that the reward structure for UC faculty be improved to enable faculty to take the time necessary to play more substantial and “hands-on” roles in UC Outreach initiatives.
- 3) ***Qualitative and longitudinal research is needed to support the development and evaluation of K-16 partnerships.*** This study suggests that the evaluation of these programs should not be held to short-term and unrealistic standards that do not take into consideration the variety of challenges and obstacles involved in the work. Research should be encouraged that examines the long-term impact of K-16 partnerships on improving the culture and practices of teaching and schooling.
- 4) ***State and UC Outreach funding for K-16 partnerships should be maintained (and in many cases, reinstated).*** Recently, budget cutbacks have threatened the commitment of the UC to achieve a diverse student body, representative of the state’s population. UC Outreach strategies such as K-16 partnerships must have adequate funding so that they may continue to develop and build on the infrastructure, programs, and institutional relationships already so painstakingly put in place, and so that the progress that has taken years to cultivate is not lost. *These efforts are important to the goal of achieving quality educational opportunities for all of California’s young people, especially those from educationally disadvantaged schools and communities.*

## References

- Anyon, J. 1980. Social class and the hidden curriculum of work. *Journal of Education*, 162 (1), 69-92.
- Cazden, C.B. 1988. Differential treatment. Chapter 5, in *Classroom discourse: the language of teaching and learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Cole, M. 1996. *Cultural psychology: a once and future discipline*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Haycock, K. 1997. *Education watch: The achievement gap in US schools*. Washington DC: The Education Trust.
- Jones, M., S. Yonezawa, E. Ballesteros, H. Mehan. 2002. Shaping pathways to higher education, *Educational Researcher*, 31(2): 3-11.
- Mehan, H., I. Villanueva, L. Hubbard, and A. Lintz. 1996. *Constructing school success. the consequences of untracking low-achieving students*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mehan, H., S. Yonezawa, O. Vásquez, and M. Jones, CREATE. 1999. *Activities and accomplishments of UCSD outreach 1998-1999*. La Jolla, California: CREATE.
- Mehan, H., S. Yonezawa, O. Vásquez, and M. Jones, CREATE. 2000. *University of California, San Diego: Campus outreach initiatives 1999-2000*. UCSD: CREATE.
- Oakes, J., A. Gamoran, and R. N. Page. 1992. Curriculum differentiation: Opportunities, outcomes, and meanings. In P. Jackson (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Curriculum*. New York: Macmillan.
- Outreach Task Force. 1997. *New directions for outreach: Report of the University of California Outreach Task Force*. <http://www.ucop.edu/regents/policies/sp1.html>.
- Sarason, S. B. 1982. *The culture of the school and the problem of change; second edition*. Boston, Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.
- Stanton-Salazar, R.. 2001. *Manufacturing hope and despair: The school and kin support networks of U.S.-Mexican youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Tyack, D. and L. Cuban. 1995. *Tinkering toward utopia. A century of public school reform*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- University of California, Educational Outreach. 2001. *Expanding educational opportunity: A status report on the educational outreach and K-12 improvement programs of the University of California, Fall 2001*. Oakland, California: Educational Outreach University of California, Office of the President.
- Vásquez, O. 2002 (in press). *La Clase Mágica: Imagining optimal possibilities in a bilingual community of learners*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Vygotsky, L.S., 1978. *Mind in society*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Willis, P. 1977. *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Yonezawa, S., M. Jones, and H. Mehan. 2002. "Partners for preparation: Constructing and redistributing social and cultural capital to achieve diversity." In: W. G. Tierney and L. S. Hagedorn (Eds.) *Extending outreach: Strategies for accessing college*. Albany NY: S-UNY Press.