

Minnesota P-20 Education Partnership — communications workgroup
Report on Career and College Readiness Communications Campaign Planning

Dec. 8, 2011

SUMMARY

Surveys repeatedly show that the vast majority of students aspire to go to college — for either a two- or four-year degree — and most of their parents have the same aspirations. Many do not get there because they do not understand the steps they need to take, and often are not receiving sufficient guidance from their schools. The lack of appropriate guidance and information is due in part to Minnesota’s poor counselor to student ratio (49th worst in the country), but also because of a lack of communication and agreement between higher education and K-12 education as to what readiness means. It is essential that information about the many ways students need to be prepared for college and career be available to students, educators and parents. This information needs to include academic readiness, college (admissions and financial) and career knowledge, and personal/social readiness.

While we see a clear need to reach out to students regarding college readiness, they are not the only audience we propose to address. There are the parents other influencers who are essential to changing student expectations and behaviors. And there are additional groups whom we need to reach, groups whose actions are critical to whether our state commits to challenging the status quo and setting high expectations for all students. These groups include policy, business and community leaders — and the general public as a whole.

We have five umbrella recommendations to address college and career readiness communications:

- 1. Address and engage several audiences — not just students, their families and educators — but also policy, business and community leaders.**
- 2. Create and share new information to help all students be college and career ready through P-20 partner collaboration.**
- 3. Plan and implement an ambitious statewide campaign.**
- 4. Reach out to policy, business and community leaders — and the general public — on college and career readiness.**
- 5. Fill gaps in existing research to ensure we target new communications efforts.**

Details on these recommendations follow.

BUDGETING

To reach students, parents, high school personnel, business and policy leaders, and the general public throughout Minnesota with a campaign promoting the value of post-high school education and imparting the basics of readiness would take at least a \$1 million annual investment and should be sustained at least three years to make a substantive impact. Such a campaign would need to be multilayered and would include social media, online, print, radio, television, and outdoor advertising. To be effective with the most crucial demographic markets, it would need also to incorporate community-specific outreach that would likely entail personal networking and events. Ideally, the campaign would include influential spokespersons to build credibility with audiences.

Developing a more precise budget estimate would be an advisable next step if P-20 determines it wants to pursue any of these recommendations. Estimates could be developed for each recommendation. That process would depend on several factors, including additional refinement of strategies and decisions about timeframe.

BACKGROUND

In June of 2010 P-20 leadership convened several working groups to follow-up on recommendations arising from the report entitled, “The Road Map to College and Career Readiness for Minnesota Students” by the Minnesota P-20 Partnership. One of those working groups was charged with the task of creating a college and career readiness communications campaign, one that makes college and career readiness information accessible to students, families, educators and communities across the state. It focused on building awareness of the Road Map’s definition of readiness and put a focus on low-income and first-generation families. (The full text of the charge is listed in Appendix A.) The term “college” is used here as it was in the Road Map, referring to technical, two- and four-year institutions.

A group of communications professionals, program directors and advocates representing college access initiatives, higher education, state agencies and others in education met for eighteen months to complete the assigned task. (A complete list of the working group members is included in Appendix B.)

While the composition of the workgroup changed frequently over that time, in part due to changes in administration and personnel, we had several fruitful discussions. When we dissected the problem and how could it be addressed, the need for information on college and career readiness was always obvious. Yet the most consistent dilemma the workgroup wrestled with was exactly whom were we trying to reach as the audience to address the challenges at hand. Different audiences require not only different messages, but also different modes of communication. We also compiled what research we could identify to assist with this work.

FIRST RECOMMENDATION:

Address and engage several audiences — not just students, their families and educators — but also policy, business and community leaders.

We have identified five primary target audiences — two of which were not identified in the original charge. The audiences included:

- Policy, business and community leaders
- The general public
- Teachers, counselor, administrators and other school staff
- Parents
- Students

For each audience, a different communications challenge was identified. Those challenges and potential responses are elaborated below. Action is needed to address each of these audiences if we are going to be able to move the needle on the core of our charge — improving the chances of low-income and first-generation students to enter and complete some form of post-secondary education. (See Appendix C for a table on message focus areas for these audiences.)

In our estimation the State of Minnesota lacks a unified vision regarding the critical importance of post-secondary education for all young people, **a sense of urgency** about the task, **the will** to set high expectations for all students and provide the support needed to help them achieve, and **a commitment to make Minnesota once again a leader in education equity**. With all of these conditions in place, the messaging on college and career readiness would become much more clear, consistent and robust.

Policy, business and community leaders

The working group members felt that not all leaders in our state have a sufficient **sense of urgency** about the seriousness of the education achievement gap, the critical importance of creating a system of career and college readiness for all students, the workforce needs of the state in the next decade and the barriers that exist for young people living in poverty to be able to access the post-secondary education. Until key leaders in the state, whatever their position, understand what is at stake in this issue, develop a common vision about the problem and solution, and unite in their commitment to move Minnesota forward, we can make little progress.

One communications opportunity is to educate policymakers, focusing on legislators themselves, about the workforce needs of the state in the next decade, programs that exist to address that need and opportunities to partner with the private, nonprofit and other public entities to make progress.

The general public

A significant share of the public seems to be unaware of the **critical importance of some post-secondary education for all of Minnesota's children**. It is important for the public to understand the needs of the workforce of the 21st century, the pressures of the global economy on our state and nation, and the gap between the skills and knowledge young people have and what they will need to be successful in the coming decade. High school graduation alone is no longer enough to guarantee a good-paying job — as well as the health of our state's economy. It can't be okay for some students to pursue post-secondary education and others not to; the public needs to see the importance of ensuring that all of our state's children are able to move on to and succeed with some form of college.

This would seem to call for a broad communications effort using a variety of media, emphasizing how much education will be needed to access the knowledge-based economy is Minnesota's future.

Teachers, counselors and administrators

The opportunity to improve outcomes based on what happens in schools was another focus for conversation. Too often in K-12 education there can be a **culture of low-expectations and unfocused college readiness efforts for low-income children**, creating major barriers for student success. Of those two issues, the culture of low-expectations is a major communications challenge. If school staff members continue to believe that only some students *can or should* be prepared for college, they will communicate that expectation to their students, the parents and the wider community. If they believe that high school graduation is *the goal*, rather than college-readiness, they will continue to operate with low standards and low expectations for the majority of our students and they will not actively embrace commitment to moving all students toward the college or post-secondary path.

We also believe that many K-12 educators are not fully aware of the academic expectations of colleges, nor the many other elements of admission, financial, personal and social aspects of college readiness, and so are unable to provide the needed guidance for students. And the focus on MCA scores as the sole measure of success shifts the focus of some school leaders who are committed to college readiness for all away from broader college readiness work.

A campaign to challenge expectations is not easy to implement, but it is a critical message to break the status-quo response to many of our students. Educators must also possess a thorough understanding of what college readiness means, and the communications ideas set forth in the next segment will address that need.

Parents and students

Though students and parents are distinct constituencies requiring different communications vehicles, they share a need for similar information, largely identified in the original charge to this committee. We already know from surveys that the vast majority of students aspire to go

to college, and most of their parents have the same aspirations. Yet many students do not enroll in or graduate from college because they do not understand the steps they need to take, and often are not receiving sufficient direction from their schools. The focus for students and parents needs to be on ‘how’ to get to college.

As for a focus on low-income and first-generation families, consider this observation from national researchers: “High schools in upper middle class areas are vehicles for college preparation, and students do not have to consider whether college is unaffordable. Low-income high schools experience the opposite situation. Going to college for first-generation students who are from low-income backgrounds is an active choice that necessitates a myriad of inter-related decisions and actions — one of which is financial aid. Far too often, these students never decide whether to attend college. By not taking the right courses, preparing for exams, among other critical steps, they have passively opted out of the college track.”¹

Students and parents need systematic information and guidance about what needs to be accomplished in high school in order to access post-secondary opportunities. They need the full spectrum of information about the college-going process from school searches, costs, financial aid, scholarships and more. If they are interested in a career path immediately after high school, they need information specific to workforce readiness and likely career opportunities in the state.

It is possible, indeed it is essential, to improve communications and messaging to students and parents about college and career readiness — even though a great deal of information already exists. However, we want to caution against putting all the responsibility on students and parents without examining the larger messages and assumptions among our leaders, our school staff and our general public.

¹ “Putting Money on the Table: Information, Financial Aid and Access to College,” Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California, p. 27

SECOND RECOMMENDATION

Create and share new information to help all students be college and career ready through P-20 partner collaboration.

Audiences

Audience target: Students, with a priority on low-income / first-generation students

Secondary audiences: Educators, parents and other student influencers

Strategies

- a. Bring P-20 members and allies together to agree on creating and using baseline definition of college readiness.**

ALIGNMENT

P-20 members and allied groups can collaborate on defining and communicating college readiness in a way that has never occurred. A common interest in improved communication about college readiness can be the catalyst for helping the state's education stakeholders move past the point they reached in 2009 with the Road Map project. A commitment to developing a consistent message about what college readiness means would provide a focus for moving ahead.

COLLABORATION

A commitment to pursue communication of the agreed-upon message effort would involve leveraging the existing communications tools of P-20 members and their allies. All P-20 members have existing communication tools to reach their memberships, all of whom have significant opportunities to reach parents, educators and students themselves. P-20 members would commit to making "College Readiness" a key communications focus; this would involve organizations formally 'signing-on' to the campaign and agreeing to be active partners in what is created and disseminated.

An implementation team from P-20 member organizations would address:

- developing effective messaging;
- ensuring agreement and playing a coordination role;
- seeking intentional tie-ins with existing and newly emerging allied efforts to ensure that we make the most of our individual efforts;
- reviewing relevant research and outcomes; and
- addressing emerging information needs as issues emerge, especially those that potentially undermine understanding of the importance of college readiness.

b. Share simple and clear messages about college readiness across the community.

MESSAGES

Clear, well substantiated messages would be created for use by P-20 partners and allies.

They would:

- Share simple steps towards readiness (aim for five);
- Have umbrella messages (i.e., “College is for everyone”), as well as some that would be more targeted;
- Craft messages that focus on reaching students who are less likely to graduate college ready (low-income and first-generation), as well as their influencers.

Messages would address both “why” some form of postsecondary education is critical, along with a few messages regarding “how.” (See appendix C.) Educators need the deepest knowledge about ‘how to,’ while parents need more of an overview, such as the importance of planning academics and finances early on. (We could seek a role for high school and college students in shaping messages.)

INFORMATION RESOURCE CONSIDERATION

Whether any new information resources would be supporting this work would be something the P-20 implementation team would review. No one wants to create more confusion or duplication if existing online and print resources are adequate. But a more careful review of this question is needed. Clearly, the substantial content of the Road Map, distilled for the audiences in question, needs to be available. And families need to be able to easily find definitive answers on how to pursue key steps towards readiness, framed to address their specific needs, with a special focus on low-income and first-generation students.

DISSEMINATION

New communications outreach efforts would be made by P-20 partners and allies, using these messages and in coordination with one another. For example, P-20 organizations would ask members to share the information with stakeholders — teachers, PTOs, community groups, etc. — and ask them to continue the theme.

An online toolkit would help various partners know where to turn for the current messages and supporting information.

We imagine a longer-term campaign, one that would be maintained for three to five years. A schedule would be developed that would feature higher profile elements and phases that the P-20 partners could support through their individual efforts.

Examples of possible outreach steps include:

- heads of P-20 member organizations submit a series of opinion pieces to ethnic print media;
- newsletters that are shared with middle school and high school parents could include articles about college readiness;
- professional development programming for educators could include sessions on preparing students for college and careers; and
- principals could make 'How to be Ready for College' a regular communication theme with parents, staff and students.

THIRD RECOMMENDATION

Plan and implement an ambitious statewide campaign.

We recommend planning an intensive student-oriented marketing and outreach campaign — building on what is suggested in the previous recommendation as our “base-level” effort.

So this recommendation focuses on what would be required to step up our efforts and aim to drive real culture change. Yes, this recommendation would require a significant investment of time, information and money.

This campaign would be to make sure students and those who are closest to the students (parents and educators) have the best information and are motivated to take action. The campaign messages would mirror those used under the second recommendation; the opportunity would be to pursue targeted strategies that would help us cut through the clutter and increase the likelihood of having an impact. In particular, research has shown the importance of large-scale public awareness campaigns regarding the availability of financial aid for low-income and first-generation audiences.²

As we reviewed in our planning effort, the examples of how this was done in Minnesota to change norms regarding teen tobacco use come up as examples to consider.

Another component to review is the extent to which new outreach is needed for low-income families tied to financial aid. The U.S. Department of Education’s IEW Practice Guide on helping students navigate the path to college recommends putting a priority on increasing families’ financial awareness, noting its importance for first-generation and low-income families.³ With a fuller understanding of what outreach activities are currently underway (see the fifth recommendation), it may be advisable to pursue proven strategies of not just creating culturally appropriate information resources on financial aid — but also supporting more efforts to share this information, such as through workshops hosted by community partners.

This option has significant costs associated with it, in terms of the development of new strategies, possible community organizing support and distribution of messages through paid media, with options for that including internet, outdoor, radio, print and television. (See the budget section on page 2 for more details.)

² “Breaking Through the barriers to College: Empowering Low-Income Communities, Schools and Families for College Opportunity and Student Financial Aid,” Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California, p. 9

³ “Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do,” U.S. Department of Education IES Practice Guide, Sept. 2009, p. 38

FOURTH RECOMMENDATION

Reach out to policy, business and community leaders — and the general public — on college and career readiness.

A. *General public*

There's a need for all Minnesotans to be more aware of the critical role of post-secondary education for all students for their individual success — as well as the state's. It is not clear, however, who in Minnesota has responsibility for addressing this issue and ensuring that current and accurate information is made available widely. The P-20 structure can be a source of information and means for that information to be distributed. As we focus on students, their parents and educators through the previous recommendations, we need to plan for how the broader public would be addressed. Steps to consider on this front include:

- Pursue research to ensure accuracy of our read of the public's perceptions (see fifth recommendation).
- Coordinate among P-20 partners on efforts to inform general public regarding importance of all students preparing for post-secondary education (could be done by same implementation team pursuing coordination around new student-oriented outreach).

B. *Policymakers*

A new, focused dialogue with legislators, the governor and other policymakers is required. The P-20 partners can call for that conversation and be reliable sources of information for our policy leaders. In some ways this need is tied to ensuring that we are clearly communicating on the “why” front — why we need more Minnesotans to be college and career ready. Steps for P-20 to consider on this front include:

- Convene policy leaders with P-20 partners and allies to articulate a goal for college readiness and the rationale.
- Clarify and report out to policy makers the gaps in college knowledge for low-income and first-generation students (see fifth recommendation).
- Empanel a core government relations-communications team to collaboratively monitor awareness and prepare needed responses for decision makers. An example is the need to respond to recent news stories that discuss high rates of unemployment among recent college grads or drop-out rates without bringing in the context of significantly higher employment rates for college grads overall. The response in this case could be the development of a P-20 fact sheet and an informational session with interested legislators.

C. Business and other community leaders

Business and other community leaders are critical players in the conversation; they are going to influence the behaviors of various groups, including policymakers and the general public. Steps to consider include:

- Involve business and community leaders in discussions with policy leaders, such as at the convening on goals.
- Work with business and community leaders to agree on the “why” of college readiness and to consider what they would want to do to support the “how” communications targeting students. Support options could include how they provide scholarships, support employees volunteering as career mentors and other steps.

FIFTH RECOMMENDATION

Fill gaps in existing research to ensure we are targeting new communications efforts.

Minnesota needs clearer answers to several questions tied to college readiness. More clarity on perceptions, resources and other interventions will be critical for refining strategies and gauging the eventual impact of any interventions. Elements of this research will also be useful with various audiences in making the case for action on college readiness.

The workgroup did review some national resources and pulled some initial environmental scan information together, thanks to staff at the Minnesota Minority Education Partnership and the University of Minnesota’s College Readiness Consortium, respectively.

Here are areas we would recommend for additional research.

	Research needs
<i>Tied to student oriented outreach</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Create definitive review of the array of existing student- and influencer-oriented communications on college readiness that are used in Minnesota— both a) messages and b) information resources. Address the utility and impact, in particular with low-income / first-generation students and their influencers. Include what explanation of “how” to be college or career ready that students are receiving. b) Determine national “best-of-class” strategies for improved college readiness understanding and action among students and their influencers, with a particular focus on low-income / first-generation students. c) Measure frequency of Minnesota students taking steps on college readiness or demonstrating college knowledge, with a particular focus on low-income / first-generation students. <i>(For example, a national Know How to Go survey reported on share of students who were taking steps to prepare for college; this topic was also addressed in MMEP’s 2010 College Access Matters II Report.)</i> d) Measure awareness and perceptions of college readiness messages and resources among Minnesota students, parents and educators. What explanation of “how” to be college or career ready is currently being communicated? <i>(For example, we do know from a Minnesota Ramp-Up to Readiness survey that 43% of parents reported that they did not know the different options for financing a college education. . . . Another relevant Minnesota Ramp-Up to Readiness survey result was that 29% of teachers did not believe that most parents expect their children to go to college.)</i>

<i>Tied to general public outreach</i>	e) Measure public perceptions of the need for all high school students to pursue post-secondary education.
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To address these needs, there may be P-20 partners that have new research results that can be relevant; that is the case, for example, with survey questions that the University of Minnesota's College Readiness Consortium and the Minnesota Private College Council are jointly sponsoring this winter. There also may be ways that P-20 partners could take new steps to help gather answers to these questions or allocate resources to supporting the cost of having this research conducted.

APPENDIX A

INITIAL WORKGROUP CHARGE

Develop a communications campaign to make college and career readiness information accessible to Minnesota students, families, educators and communities across the state. The plan should ensure that the Minnesota P-20 Education Partnership's broad definition of "Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness," is widely understood by the public. The plan should also ensure that students and their families, especially low income and first generation college students, understand:

- *The academic and workplace skills, personal and social skills, and college and career knowledge that constitute "readiness;"*
- *The importance of completing rigorous courses in middle and high school;*
- *Options for getting a "jump start" on postsecondary study and workforce preparation (e.g., PSEO, Tech Prep);*
- *How to develop a college and career attainment plan informed through assessments;*
- *How to access various pathways to college and careers including those outside of course taking; and*
- *Information about the costs and affordability of college, especially how to access financial aid.*

APPENDIX B

College and Career Readiness Communications Work Group Members

Membership as of December 2011

<p>CHAIR: John Manning, Director of Marketing and Communications Minnesota Private College Council jmanning@mnprivatecolleges.org / Phone: 651-293-6805 / Cell Phone: 651-271-9402</p>
<p>Greg Abbott, Director of Communications Minnesota School Boards Association gabbott@mnmsba.org / Phone: 507-934-2450 / Cell Phone: 507-420-1881</p>
<p>Jessica Bauer, Director of Career Services Minnesota School of Business jessicabauer@msbcollege.edu / Phone: 763-585-5231 / Cell Phone: 763-227-7710</p>
<p>Sandy Connolly, Director of Communications Minnesota Office of Higher Education Sandy.connolly@state.mn.us / Phone: 651-259-3902</p>
<p>Pam Costain, President and CEO Achieve Minneapolis pcostain@achievempls.org / Phone: 612-455-1555</p>
<p>Jessica Espinosa, Dual Enrollment Specialist Minnesota Department of Education jjessica.espinosa@state.mn.us / Phone: 651-582-8512</p>
<p>Gwendolyn Freed, Executive Director Wallin Partners gwendolyn.freed@wallinpartners.org / Phone: 612-877-7027</p>
<p>Emily Jacobs, Communications Coordinator Admission Possible Emily@Admission.Possible.org / emilygjacobs@gmail.com / Phone: 651-917-3525</p>

<p>Nancy Jacobsen, Executive Director iSeek Solutions/CareerOneStop, MnSCU nancy.jacobsen@so.mnscu.edu / Phone: 651-201-1515</p>
<p>Ying Lee, Community Speaker and Organizer yingleemn@gmail.com / Phone: 651-592-2481</p>
<p>Maria Pabon, Product Developer Casa de Esperanza mpabon@casadeesperanza.org / Phone: 651-646-5553</p>
<p>Chad Ruter Washington Technology Magnet Middle School Chad.ruter@spps.org / Phone: 651-293-8830</p>
<p>Walter B. Roberts Department of Counseling and Student Personnel Minnesota State University – Mankato Walter.roberts@mnsu.edu / Phone: 507-389-5659</p>
<p>Julie Sweitzer Director of Leadership Initiatives College Readiness Consortuim, U of MN Sweit001@umn.edu / Phone: 612-625-5324 /Cell: 612-965-5807</p>
<p>Melinda Voss, Public Relations Director Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System melinda.voss@so.mnscu.edu / Phone: 651-201-1804</p>
<p>Amanda Ziebell-Finley, Program Associate Minnesota Minority Education Partnership aziebell-finley@mmep.net / Phone: 651-645-7400</p>

Several former members of the workgroup were active contributors along the way, including Ann Kjorstad, Barb Schlaefer, Christine Dufour, Raul Ramos and Linda Kohl.

APPENDIX C

Message priorities by audience

The first recommendation identifies five audience groupings. In our discussions about messaging, we returned regularly to the shorthand of focusing on the “why” of college readiness as well as the “how.” Here’s the way we assigned the audiences to those two message areas.

AUDIENCES	“HOW” messages	“WHY” messages
Students	X	
Parents	X	
Teachers, counselor, administrators and other school staff	X	X
Policy, business and community leaders		X
General public		X