Creating a University-Going Environment at the Elementary Level

As educators working in public school systems, we reflect on an ongoing basis as we attempt to mold future American citizens. In the years to come, these students will be the problem-solving, critical-thinking, technology-driven, globally connected, productive members of the democratic society of which we are so proud to be members. Today’s elementary students will make decisions regarding tomorrow’s crucial questions. It is our responsibility to prepare them for the challenge.

As we prepare our students, we reflect on our practices whether we are in the classroom or administrators at a school site. The reflective questions necessary to transcend all walls and grade levels are:

- What can I do at the elementary level to help my students set the expectation of attending a university or college if they do not have an immediate role model at home?
- How can I help my students perceive themselves as university/college material?
- How can I inspire my students to attend college?

A How-to Guide

As I reflect on my own school experiences as a young Latina, and remember all the students and families I have met as a teacher and an administrator, I can safely state that many of the same issues affecting today’s students attending public schools in the inner city and in low socioeconomic areas were my issues as I was growing up. What made a difference for me was my fifth- and sixth-grade teacher, who had high expectations for all of his students, and my two visits to UCLA while in elementary school. My teacher also set college-going expectations for all of his students by arranging field trips to UCLA and telling us that we could achieve anything we set out to do. My teacher and my two field trips to the university left a lasting impression, and you and your faculty can do the same by establishing a college-going environment at the elementary level. Here are 10 ways to do just that.

Facilitate a college-going shared vision. At the beginning of the school year, before students arrive on campus and teachers are sitting in professional development activities, revisit your school’s vision and mission statement. As the school administrator, recommend that the words “a college-going environment” be part of your vision and mission if they are not currently part of the statements. As a school, agree to have one of the teachers’ goals be to create a college-going environment in their classrooms.

Share teacher credentials. Have all teachers at the school make copies of their university diplomas and their credentials, and post them in their classrooms. On the first day of school, when they are establishing classroom rules and expectations, have them share their educational background and credentials with their students. This will let students know that their teacher is a resource and role model for college aspirations.

Rename your immediate physical environment. Name buildings within your school after colleges and universities. In the classroom, suggest that teachers use college or university names as table names.

Integrate instructional practices and your college-going environment. Assign college names to grade levels. Have each teacher in each grade level create a college bulletin board reflective of their grade-level college name. Teachers should encourage students to contribute positive affirmations on this bulletin board on an ongoing basis, emphasizing how they know they are on their way to college. For example, if a child in the first grade does well on a spelling test he or she can state, “I know I am on my way to college because I do well on my spelling tests!” This will help students understand that every positive choice they make on a daily basis is helping them get a step closer to college.

Nurture your college-going school culture. Hold college/university spirit days on an ongoing basis. On this day, have students wear clothing that endorses...
their grade level or favorite college or university.

**Promote and foster relationships with college students.** Survey your immediate school community, students’ families, teaching staff, and support staff. Ask your stakeholders how many have older siblings or family members who attend a college or university. Once you have recruited a pool of college-going young adults, ask them to adopt one of your upper-grade classrooms and take part in various activities with the students.

**Integrate the concept of college and planned school activities.** On your career day, ask your guest speakers to bring copies of their college or university diplomas as they share their jobs with the students at your school. This lets students know the integral part a college education plays in many professions.

**Hold college literacy events.** Plan a college literacy day and invite college students to your school to read their favorite children’s books. Have them share the importance of reading as well as their college-going experiences. You should have students prepare questions for their visitors. All students should be encouraged to wear attire advertising a college.

**Establish relationships with local colleges.** Contact the community outreach office at local or nearby universities and arrange field trips to college campuses. You may want to visit the college campuses your college-going group attends. Giving elementary students the opportunity to visit a college or university campus during a regular instructional day is important as you help them understand what a college class looks like.

**Promote a college-going environment until the very last day.** Invite a college or university student who has agreed to adopt one of your upper-grade classrooms to be a keynote speaker on the last day of the school year. This will send a strong college-going message to your students and their families.

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