

OVERVIEW

Curriculum Structure and Rationale

The structure of the College Inquiry curriculum is based on two sources: current research into issues of access to higher education for first generation-to-college students, and years of work with these students inside high schools across New York City.

A growing body of research shows that, while high schools across the country are working to raise academic standards, they are not preparing students in another area critical to college access and success, namely the college planning process. Far too many academically prepared students are leading what some call “constrained” college searches, where they fail to look at, and then apply to, a range of colleges that may match their abilities and interests. Others complete this initial step, but then fail to follow through on the necessary paperwork for admission or financial aid. There is a growing consensus in the educational community that high schools need to build the work of supporting students in the college process into their mission and structures if they are to truly provide college access for all of their students.

Research with first-generation-to-college students and their families indicates that they often haven’t had access to experiences that will build their familiarity with this process, including the following key areas:

1 The range of colleges in the United States.

There are over 3,000 colleges and universities, and the number is growing. Thus, students are faced with a bewildering array of choices. Most have heard of Harvard and Princeton and of their local community college, and they might have a sense that the former are “better” than the latter. But what, actually, are the differences? And what are the options in between? Too often, students do not have familiarity with a wider range of colleges that might turn out to be good matches for them.

2 The nature of professional work, the fields of study with which they intersect, and the paths to and through college (and beyond) that lead to them.

While aspiring to professional careers—doctors, lawyers, accountants—first generation-to-college students often have little exposure to adults who work in these fields. They need exposure over time to these kinds of work, as well as the opportunity to explore how their own interests and talents might fit into the world of adult work, and what shape those “fields” take as majors in college study. For some students who are not sure if college is “for them”, exploring the links between personal interests, college majors, and careers is often an important way to begin to connect to post-secondary education as a goal for themselves.

3 The college application process.

In order to understand what schools will be asking about in relation to their high school performance (transcripts, recommendations by teachers and guidance counselors, extracurricular activities) and what they will be asked to produce during the application process itself (an essay, filling out applications, sending transcripts, money to pay for applications, test scores), students need to gain familiarity with this process. Students need to know this starting in 9th grade, and be able to plan their high school career accordingly.

4 The costs of college and financial aid available to help pay for it.

Too many first-generation-to-college students either cross college off as an option because they believe they and their families cannot afford it OR don't take finances into account at all in their college search and application process. Research documents that while these students may apply and be accepted to college under these circumstances, they are unlikely to matriculate to or graduate from college. Student—and their families—need to begin learning about both the costs of college and the financial aid available to help pay a portion of that cost, early in their high school career, and in increasingly specific ways as they get closer to graduation.

Thus, throughout their high school career, students need to be engaged in experiences that will help them to understand:

- > **Mapping the Landscape of College:** What colleges are out there?
- > **Exploring Careers:** How do my interests and abilities connect to college majors and to careers?
- > **The College Application Process:** What does it take to get into a college that will be right for me?
- > **Paying for College:** How can I afford it?



Three important guidelines for this work:

COLLEGE INQUIRY: HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM

BEGIN EARLY

Begin in 9th grade—or before—to work with students around these issues. Far too many schools currently wait until students’ junior or senior year to directly address the college search and application process; however, research shows (and most schools find) that this is far too late to begin this work.

BUILD STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES IN THESE IMPORTANT AREAS EACH YEAR

With an understanding that the above are four wide areas of need, schools can approach them as four broad curriculum areas to address. Ideally, students would do a range of activities in each area every year. It is less important to hit on every single activity included in the College Inquiry curriculum than to be sure to address the areas each year that students are in high school. Schools’ work on these four topics needs to spiral; that is, students need to visit these and then revisit them, building additional understanding each time. Each “visiting” needs to be developmentally appropriate: what 9th graders need to know and understand in each of these areas is not the same as what 12th graders need to know and understand. 9th graders do not need to be ready to fill out a FAFSA, but 12th graders do; looking through a college application to see what you notice and what questions you have is appropriate for 9th graders, but insufficient for 12th graders.

USE INQUIRY

Best practices in implementing college access curriculum mirror those of implementing good curriculum in science, history, and other subject matters. College Inquiry lessons are designed with an eye to positioning students as active inquirers, rather than receivers of information. They also require active engagement by teachers throughout the lessons in order to work best, and will take root most deeply if students see these topics engaged throughout their classes (e.g., through writing their college essays in English class, or figuring out the amount of interest they have to pay on a 5% Perkins loan over 10 years in their math class) rather than only in one particular part of the school day. Working together as teams, teachers can discuss lesson implementation (either before or after lessons, or both), allowing teachers to innovate, learn from each other, and hold each other accountable for completing this work in their classrooms, and to adjust plans based on the needs of the particular students that are sitting in front of them. It is the goal of the College Inquiry curriculum to empower those particular young people with the knowledge they need to make informed choices about their next steps after high school, and beyond.