

# SOUND BUSINESS INC.

## A NEW APPROACH TO COLLEGE ACCESS FOR BLACK AND LATINO YOUTH

### Introduction

In response to the current educational landscape, numerous college access programs have emerged in an effort to address college access for Black and Latino students in NYC and across the country. Various access programs aim to provide college preparation, most focus on strengthening academics while providing exposure to the college application process and formative procedures. The current literature explores why college access programs are still needed and suggest that in their absence, college access for Black and Latino students would likely be even more dismal than its current state. Although, these programs seemingly provide opportunities for students who may have otherwise not entered the college market, there are some criticisms and areas for improvement. One major issue that college access programs must address are the disparities that exist in terms of institutional type. Not only is there a lack of Black and Latino students who attend college, a closer look at who attends selective institutions also tells a deeper story of inequity that needs to be addressed.

“ONLY 13 PERCENT OF THE CITY’S BLACK AND LATINO STUDENTS CURRENTLY GRADUATE HIGH SCHOOL PREPARED FOR COLLEGE, COMPARED WITH 50 PERCENT OF WHITE STUDENTS AND 50 PERCENT OF ASIAN STUDENTS”

The collaboration between Sound Business Inc., a non-profit organization and A. Philip Randolph, a New York City Public High School, offers an

alternative solution to improving the educational trajectory of Black and Latino students. Their collaboration can best be described as an *Inclusive Grassroots Cooperative* that aims to engage students, the community and alum, ultimately improving the educational experience for Black and Latino students from some of the most underserved parts of the City.

### What We Know

General public high school quality is not up to par, but in neighborhoods with minority students, the academic supports, extracurricular opportunities and college prep techniques are lagging even further, “only 13 percent of the city’s Black and Latino students currently graduate high school prepared for college, compared with 50 percent of White students and 50 percent of Asian Students” (Fruchter et al, 2012p. 6). Research also suggests, “students tended to prefer high schools that matched their own academic, racial and socio-economic background. With this in mind, it is important to consider the impact of neighborhood schools and the ways in which they specifically address the needs of Black and Latino students. NYC’s high school admission process is competitive, however access to top quality high schools are further complicated for Black and Latino students because of their tendency to choose schools that are socio-culturally familiar. Fruchter et al (2012), argue “These patterns suggest that universal choice will be limited in its ability to prevent stratification of students across schools by race, socio-economic status, and academic ability (pg. 8)”. As it currently stands, New York City public schools tell a story of inequity and a cyclical “sticky trap” that keep students and their families in

a cycle of underemployment with little room to move upward on the economic ladder. With this backdrop, the need for college access programs becomes readily apparent.

College access programs are an essential component to the American higher education machine. As institutions seek to increase the diversity of their student population, they rely heavily on the partnerships that they have with college access programs. Non-profits and federally funded initiatives work to identify students of color who may have the potential to compete in the educational market, but may not have the social, cultural or economic capital to pursue admission to selective institutions, or any type of post-secondary experience. Researchers have noted parental influence, peer relationships and social networks are an essential part to empowering low-income students of color to make more informed college selection decisions.

Unfortunately, many programs (Pulley, 2000, Harper & Griffin, 2011) have a limited reach because they offer external programming that isn't embedded in the makeup of the high school culture. Additionally, programs selectively choose students who have already expressed concrete interests in applying to selective institutions but may not have the economic resources to do so. This cherry picking approach certainly increases the amount of college bound hopefuls, but only within a limited sector of the population.

## Approach & Results

The existing research suggests that there are several key factors that alleviate hurdles to selective institutions for Black and Latino Students. Academic performance, counselor relationships, social and economic constraints, parental influence and fear of the unknown have been identified as potential barriers to access. Researchers have focused on why

students are not successful, however further exploration of successful college access models is needed. The views and opinions of Black and Latino low-income students in urban areas are an essential component to understanding ways in which educational practices can be improved and to uncover the supports that they deem most useful for their own college pursuits. The strength of qualitative research is that it gives a voice to those who are least likely to be heard. By using a case study approach, this research explored:

- How SBI seeks to address barriers to selective institutions for Black and Latino youth in NYC.
- How does SBI support Black and Latino student academic performance and future academic or career aspirations?
- What are the key components of the SBI and A. Philip Randolph collaboration? How does this model similar/ different to other college access models?

This model of integrated collaboration is a rare approach that has not been adequately explored by researchers or practitioners. There is potentially a lot to be learned from students, staff and the educators who participate in this particular intervention.

## Findings/Contribution

SBI's mission is grounded in a "for us, by us" way of thinking that challenges students, their families, staff, alumnus and all other supporters to be active agents in changing the educational landscape for people of color. Participants in the SBI community all contribute financial capital that serves as a crucial support for the program's success. However, SBI's true treasure lies in its human capital. SBI has served as a vehicle for creating *Communal Cultural Wealth* (Yosso, 2005). The model aims to produce socially aware and culturally enriched students who feel validated, not shamed by their personal and familial experiences. These outcomes are unique and may be characteristic of the sustained in-house partnership

between the two organizations. While there is certainly room for improvement, SBI currently provides a comprehensive approach that addresses academic coaching, college preparation, cultural competencies and parental/peer engagement.

Additionally, the Randolph/SBI partnership extends beyond typical college access paradigms, ultimately affecting the longevity, socio-political context, and climate of Randolph. There are three ways in which the partnership between APR and SBI has developed over time 1) Randolph assisting SBI 2) SBI assisting Randolph and 3) SBI/Randolph Innovative Collaborations. These three distinctive areas of partnership are necessary to 1) understand the exchange of services and resources 2) recognize areas of shared vs. independent responsibilities for improving student experiences and 3) to explore ways in which the partnership fosters change.

SBI demonstrates that the additional financial support and programming from a non-profit can add value to the academic curriculum, while crafting opportunities for broad-ranging skills and building a base for improved social and cultural capital. Perhaps this model has the power to create meaningful systemic change in neighborhoods that are at the bottom rungs of the economic scale. Opportunities for insightful curriculum change and fresh funding opportunities could add new elements to both Randolph and SBI. As Randolph and SBI staff noted, “SBI isn’t a college prep program, that’s just one part of it.”

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The New York City Department of Education’s broad based Equity & Excellence For All initiative finally turns attention to long-standing disparities within the educational system. The College Access for All- High School campaign’s major goal is to ensure that “Every high school student will have access to a true “college-ready” culture. By the 2018-

19 school year, every student will graduate from high school with an individual college and career plan and have access to resources that will support them in pursuing that plan” (NYC Department of Education, Equity & Excellence for All).

If college access for all is the true mantra for NYC public schools, what additional resources are needed to make it happen? History and current learning conditions tell us that students in low-income neighborhoods, specifically Black and Latino students, have consistently received sub-par academic preparation, and the educators who serve them are often bombarded with competing pressures and limited financial resources. The added hurdle of true college readiness may not be practical in the current educational structure. The partnership between Randolph and SBI, perhaps offers an alternative to traditional public school delivery models and the growing charter school industry. The Inclusive Grassroots Framework, uses the traditional supports of a public school, however college-readiness and real life-transition is an achievable task because of the enhanced supports that SBI offers. With limited forms of traditional economic and personnel resources, partnerships that champion community cultural wealth are an obvious but underutilized approach to transforming the educational lives of NYC’s most underserved students.

Furthermore, SBI seeks to give the public a stronger role in public education. This may seem controversial, however, the absence of community input, especially in communities of color has seemingly led to educational standards and strategies that are disconnected from the needs of the very people that these institutions aim to serve. As the Department of Education looks for innovative partners, it is important to consider whether these partnerships will be external add-ons, or teams of dedicated educators who are committed to crafting

culturally responsive approaches that meet the needs of specific populations. The success of these programs cannot solely be measured by high school graduation rates and the number of students who apply to post-secondary institutions. While the idea of a holistic approach to education is certainly not new, this study provides an example of a model that actually seems to achieve that intended goal. Learning to navigate the college application process

and financial aid is important, however this study suggests, that long-term success for Black and Latino students requires much more than resolving problems associated with the technicalities of the admissions process. There are larger structures in place that often impede the success of these overlooked populations, and students must be given the skills to remain resilient.

#### RESOURCES & SUGGESTED READINGS

Equity & Excellence for All. <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/schools/equityandexcellence/default.htm>

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Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race ethnicity and education*, 8(1), 69-91.