
This study examines a question suggested by Durkheim -- how do schools engage students to prepare for adult roles? The question is easy for high achieving students: schools tell them they have desirable futures if they continue to work hard. For low achieving students, schools' usual message is failure, and, not surprisingly, students resist engaging in schools that say they will be failures (Paul Willis). In recent decades, the US has conveyed a new message, "college for all," and low achieving students are told they can attend college and have a second chance at success. But this is an abrupt change from prior decades and indeed from most of students' prior school experience.

How do high schools respond to this college-for-all message and get students to engage in planning, applying, and financing for college? Unlike France, where university access is straightforward, college access in the US is complex, with 4000 institutions, multiple and often unstated selection criteria, and often high expenses. US high schools have guidance counselors, who give college advice (among their many functions). Although these counselors are a source of college information, upper-middle-class students get information from parents and sometimes private counselors, so school counselors only need to supplement that information. However, for students whose parents did not attend college, school counselors may not be sufficient. Almost half (47%) of low income students don't attend college.

This is a study of a new way of reaching these students. The college coach program in Chicago public schools is a new method to tell students they have a future, they can attend college, and what they can do about it. We examined whether this program increases college going (or 4-year college-going) for certain groups of students and how it does so.

In contrast with high school guidance counselors, whose professional role and training specify that they are nondirective and passive in responding to student requests in 1:1, short isolated meetings, college coaches take a more directive, active, and reaching out approach to work with students in extended repeated group interactions. Coaches seek to engage seniors in thinking about their future and doing something about it.

In statistical analysis using a remarkable administrative data set on all students in the entire Chicago public school system and following them after they leave, we show that the program has strong impact on student actions, on the formation of specific plans, and on college attendance, and we show the program is especially effective for the most disadvantaged students (Stephan, 2010a). In qualitative analyses, we discover some methods college coaches use to reach students, make them engaged, and assist them in completing effective actions (Stephan, 2010b, Naffziger and Rosenbaum, 2010). These findings may indicate actions guidance counselors can take to achieve similar goals (Stephan and Rosenbaum, 2011; Becker, 2011) The study has important implications for understanding what is necessary to engage students, particularly low achieving and disadvantaged students, and in helping them prepare for their future after high school. Although some lessons are specific to the US, some lessons have general implications for many societies.