Career Beginnings

A Summary of:

Career Beginnings (hereafter CB), started by Brandeis University’s Center for Human Resources in 1986 and now managed by School & Main (a Boston-based organization which works to improve education, career opportunities, and transitions to high school, college, or postsecondary training and careers for youth), “identifies high school students with college potential who, because of average grades and economically and/or educationally disadvantaged family backgrounds, might otherwise be unlikely to attend college.” Through a combination of educational and employment services, it helps them enroll in college or find better jobs than they would ordinarily attain. CB integrates four types of support: career exploration and action plan development, educational enrichment, mentoring, and employment.

Overview

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Evidence of Effectiveness

Between 1987 and 1988, seven sites were part of a control/experimental group Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (hereafter MDRC) evaluation to study the effects of CB. The following statistically significant data show that compared to the control group, CB participants:

- had a 9.7 percent increase in the rate of college attendance in the post-high school year (53.2 percent vs. 48.5 percent for controls)
- more often started college “on schedule” in the Fall semester [the differential in college attendance was about 6 percentage points in September, October and November, and although it narrowed, persisted at a statistically significant level through May (47.9 vs. 43.4 percent)]
- had similar high retention rates in college, at least during their first year (90 percent in four-year colleges in the first year, 81 percent in two-year colleges in the first year)
- worked less and earned less—an outcome expected due to time spent enrolled in college rather than working

Key Components

Features common to all CB sites include:

- collaboration among a local college or university, public secondary schools and the business community
- jobs during the summer between the student’s junior and senior year
- monthly workshops and classes throughout the student’s 15 months of involvement, on a range of career development competencies and topics (financial aid, test preparation, job readiness, etc.)
- counseling to help students make educational and career choices
• adult mentors from the business and professional community who serve as role models and meet with youths one-on-one to help them plan for the future

Contributing Factors

Providing a Service “Package”
In areas without extensive community services, CB provides guidance and referrals to scarce services. In communities where young people already have a wide array of services available to them, CB coordinates local partnership efforts and structures existing services into a more efficient and effective delivery system.

A Systematic Approach to Implementation
MDRC: “Sites that were judged to have implemented the program most effectively produced the largest impacts, while sites judged the least successful at implementation had the smallest impacts.” Initially, CB allowed for a great deal of flexibility, which led to considerable variation among sites. The study concluded that “program implementation matters” and “suggests the value of a more prescriptive approach.” Staffing was one area where MDRC recommended “including minimum requirements to ensure that programs have the personnel necessary to give a new program the attention it needs.” Insufficient numbers of staff also proved a problem.

Update
The MDRC study covers the second year of the CB pilot, 1987-1988. Upon conclusion of the pilot, 18 communities continued their CB efforts and 15 new communities initiated the next generation of the model. Information on these 33 CB sites after 1990, and through 1997, has been provided by William Bloomfield of School & Main. Of the more than 15,000 participants (largely B/C grade average, first generation in college, at-risk):

• 95 percent graduated from high school
• 71 percent went on to college compared to 37 percent of students in the same demographic group nationally who went to college

In addition to the factors contributing to CB’s results in its early years, current results and staying power over the long term are attributed to:

Effective Implementation
CB worked to find the appropriate balance between broad flexibility and common goals, objectives and design. While sites have great flexibility in how they deliver services to students, years of experience have led to critical programmatic elements which are uniformly high in quality and geared to achieve measurable outcomes. The integration of good student services to achieve the “synergy” that makes them more effective, as well as the local leadership “glue” needed to hold effective community partnerships together, requires an explicit focus on management and operations.

Broad-Based and Productive Partnerships
In order to be truly systemic, CB seeks to engage a broad base of local stakeholders (principals, superintendents, business partners, post-secondary education staff, local government, etc.) and gives them active leadership, management and implementation roles and responsibilities, a key to creating a vigorous public-private partnership. As a result, CB has “less of a programmatic and more of a community development character,” which increases support for education reform and improves school-to-career system-building.
STUDY METHODOLOGY
The evaluation examined program impacts in seven of the 24 CB sites operating in 1987-88, the second year of the program. Each site recruited approximately 200 juniors, who met the CB eligibility criteria, from a number of local high schools. A total of 1,574 students were randomly assigned in equal numbers to experimental and control groups. The report is based on the experiences of 1,233 youths who responded to two follow-up interviews conducted one and two years after the random assignment. There were no systematic differences at the outset between experimental and control group members.

EVALUATION FUNDING
Evaluation funded by The Commonwealth Fund and John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

GEOGRAPHIC AREAS
The seven CB sites covered in the evaluation were: The Bronx, NY (Bronx Community College); Gary, IN (Indiana University Northwest); Indianapolis, IN (Butler University); Jacksonville, FL (Jacksonville University); Rochester, NY (University of Rochester); Santa Ana, CA (Rancho Santiago Community College); and Youngstown, OH (Youngstown State University).

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