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Higher ed and K-12 cooperation boosts outcomes, access

Two initiatives discussed in a panel at SXSWedu highlight the benefits of partnership across all levels of the education field

by Roger Riddell



In a highly conversational panel at SXSWedu last week, Port Richmond High School Principal Timothy Gannon, Wagner College President Richard Guarasci, Rutgers University-Camden Associate Chancellor for Civic Engagement Nyeema Watson and Knowledgeworks Foundation Vice President Byron White discussed the need for greater cooperation between K-12 districts and higher ed institutions.

Particularly for schools in areas where high levels of inequality and racial hierarchy have contributed to lost higher education access and low high school graduation rates, partnerships with local colleges and universities can help lift K-12 outcomes and improve students' opportunities. Among the efforts discussed, two stuck out in particular.

How Wagner College is serving Staten Island's Port Richmond High School

"If you follow MTV and the portrayal of Staten Island and that culture, you would get an idea of us being heavily Italian, basically Brooklyn moved over the bridge, upper-middle class folks — and certainly part of Staten Island is like that," Gannon said.

Port Richmond, however, is the "exact opposite" on another end of the island. The area is primarily low-income with a high undocumented South American and Mexican population, as

well as a large Arabic population. The families and kids struggle, and Gannon noted that in 2010, violence rose between the various groups in the area.

Guarasci, whose college is on the other end of the island, saw a need and aimed to offer resources including the college campus, students and curriculum, to positively impact the area's students by shifting the culture.

There is now a Wagner College center within the high school building to help encourage students and facilitate that culture change with students as well as their parents, the latter of which may not value higher education or see it as a realistic possibility for their kids. College students work with the high school students, with one example provided being college nursing program students collaborating with Culinary Arts students one day a week on making recipes healthier. When the high school kids see the college kids and work with them, they can think to themselves, "I can be like that. They're just like me."

The partnership also plans to help kids to start thinking in kindergarten about the question of how they can impact their community and then follow them through school with that question.

Wagner and Port Richmond also intervene with students who wouldn't have originally gone to college and put them through a three-year leadership program as sophomores. They move 12 students into dorms for two weeks on campus every summer to live as college students, getting a computer, laptop, or iPad at the beginning along with stipends at the end. The program is aimed at directing them toward college and facilitating success.

The first cohort group is currently in college, eight are on Wagner scholarships, and Gannon said one has a 3.8 GPA. At least 4-6 members of every cohort will attend Wagner with room and board free, eliminating as many barriers as possible.

The Rutgers-Camden connection

"For a lot of people, when you hear about the city of Camden, I don't know if you've heard our students talking, it's been deemed one of the most dangerous cities in the country several years over," Watson said. Originally from Camden, her career took her away from the city for a number of years as she worked jobs at the Department of Education and the University of Pennsylvania, but she eventually found herself back there with Rutgers University.

The city is only about 9 square miles with 77,000 residents, but about 37% of the population is under 24.

Speaking about her experience as a student at Rutgers-Camden, Watson noted that the campus hadn't always been open and friendly to the community. Through her work at the university, she's been able to encourage the university to think more about its place within the city.

Two initiatives that have been launched since include the Rutgers Future Scholars program across the entire university system tasked with transitioning students from host communities (which also include Newark and New Brunswick) into the university. All of the system's host communities have large African-American, Latino, and low-income populations that typically didn't have access to higher ed. RFS has students apply in the 7th grade, accepting 50 and working year-round with them, as well as their families, via university programming, events, support and mentoring through senior year of high school.

Those who complete the program and enroll at Rutgers receive a four-year tuition scholarship. The program is free to students, but costs about \$400,000 a year to the institution. Watson said she fundraises about 90% of that herself and the remaining 10% in financial support comes from the university.

For students who don't get into RFS, a leadership gift from two alums — both prominent medical doctors — has helped open the Hill Family Center for College Access. The center focuses on doing similar work to the RFS program, but on a citywide scale through community organizations, churches and schools to help any student who wants to forge a pathway to college.

Rutgers-Camden also has a place-based effort called the North Camden Schools Partnership that works directly with the neighborhood next to the campus to offer an after-school program to students in grades 4-8, which also includes weekend campus visits and a six-week summer program. The initiative is aimed at building a pipeline and helping students who want to go to college achieve that goal.