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# The Role of Community Colleges in Alleviating Poverty

Diego James Navarro

Recently while surfing cable channels in my hotel room, I came upon a scene portraying a police officer pushing in the flimsy door of a downscale apartment, the kind I lived in during my teenage years on North Gary Avenue in Pomona, California. Inside, a mother sat crying on a couch with her two wide-eyed children. Her husband, after an all-day drinking binge, had broken some glass and cut himself badly, proceeding to beat his wife and flee the scene. The officer notified the family that they had the man in custody down the street. The novelty of watching cable, an amenity I don't have at home, now worn off, I turned off the TV.

This chilling scene has stuck with me because of its similarity to experiences I've heard my students describe. With luck, the two small children on the couch will get over the trauma of their youth and have successful educational experiences and rewarding lives. However, after repeated experiences like this one, how well will they be prepared for college level study in its entirety? Will they be able to concentrate and focus amid academic pressures; to see education as relevant to their lives?

Many of my students have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and many still experience violence on a regular basis in their neighborhoods and homes. The morning before our first pilot course of the Academy for College Excellence (ACE) eleven years ago, one of my students was cut by in knife in a small gang tussle in the parking lot of the college campus in Watsonville. Cabrillo's Watsonville campus is in a Norteño neighborhood, which means students from Sureño neighborhoods must cross this invisible territorial line in order to attend their college courses.<sup>1</sup> Attending college is more than academics for some students. It can be about risking your own life.

While ACE was originally piloted with students from rural, often agrarian, Latino backgrounds, we have found the program to work for all students, especially those who have exhibited post-traumatic stress symptoms. From students in inner-city Oakland to students in Broward County, Florida, the ACE curriculum and pedagogy is universal. I believe this is because the trauma of rough neighborhoods and poor educational experiences is universal for those who have experienced it.

There are multiple symptoms of trauma stemming from poverty that I have witnessed over the eleven years I have spent in the classroom. In the first weeks of class, the

emotional wounds from previous educational experiences are reopened and the students revert to old patterns, reactions, and feelings of inadequacy. These include bio-reactions (fight, flight, freeze, or appease, all of which are stress related reactions) due to a misinterpretation of college culture, apathy because of the irrelevance of academics in the face of daily realities at home, tardiness, fear of participating in discussions, and an inaccurate sense of self-efficacy. It is no wonder that attrition is so high for academically underprepared students from difficult back-grounds. Every day they walk into the classroom carrying much more than their academic deficits.

To my knowledge, the most common definition of basic skills does not take into consideration the realities faced by many, if not the majority, of our students. Before they can engage in active learning, these students must develop a positive sense of self, a mindset of possibility, and a feeling of safety and caring. I call these the "precursors to academic performance." The definition from Page 4 of *Basic Skills as a Foundation for Student Success in California Community Colleges*, otherwise known as the "Poppy Copy," reads: "Basic skills are those foundation skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and English as a second language, as well as learning skills and study skills, which are necessary for students to succeed in college-level work." This definition does not address the symptoms and behaviors exhibited by my students, nor the precursors students must attain before they can be actively engaged in academics. The most pervasive model of basic skills education will continue to fail until it addresses the whole student, from their symptoms of trauma to their inability to read and write at college level.

Our students' lives outside of school have a real impact on their success in college. Everyday traumas create conditions in their minds and bodies that do not allow them to perform at optimal levels. These students' habitual behaviors, while necessary for survival in difficult situations, hinder their development as successful students in higher education. Watching your back will prevent you from getting killed on the street, but doing so in school will keep you from processing important information that you need to pass your class.

For educators, determining how to best support our students can be a daunting task. Some of us might feel that

while addressing trauma is necessary and important, it would take years of counseling and months of non-credit courses to create the right learning conditions for these students. Not to mention finding and allocating funding for likely expensive programs to address this facet of our students' needs.

I know there is an alternative and affordable way to address these issues, but it will require a shift in our thinking. We will need to change our current conception of curriculum, pedagogy, and counseling, and reevaluate our integrated support services that, while helpful for some students, are too expensive and unsustainable at a sufficient scale to meet the needs of most unprepared students.

Over the last eleven years, I've worked with many wonderful people to develop ACE, formerly known as the Digital Bridge Academy. The focus of our work has been threefold: to 1) develop transformative curriculum and pedagogical approaches that address the precursors for academic performance noted above, 2) light a fire for learning within our students during a two-week immersion course, and 3) accelerate basic skills education. We've created exercises that leverage current neurological research, built a comprehensive behavior system that provides students feedback on their progress in developing knowledge-work behaviors critical for academic and professional success, and determined the right method for creating a strong cohort bond where students provide and receive 24/7 peer-to-peer support (a service that costs the college nothing).

If there's one thing I've witnessed my students do time and time again it is survive. And despite the years I've taught this program, their strength and ability still surprises me. It is amazing that students who have faced harsh and chaotic life experiences have the ability to succeed, thrive, and persist in college. Our students can step up to the plate. I've seen it happen countless times. We can put these students on the path to academic success with the proper pedagogy, teacher training, and curriculum. If we build it, they will thrive.

We have to step up to the plate too.

**Note:**

<sup>1</sup> The 'Norteños' and 'Sureños' are Mexican gangs.

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Haylee Trowbridge

*Guns Don't Kill People* (2013)

Media: Acrylic

Courtesy of Cabrillo Art Gallery

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