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**Developing Human Capital in an At-risk School
Population: Pairing Social Justice Initiatives and
Pre-professional Experiences**

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Developing Human Capital in an At-risk School Population: Pairing Social Justice Initiatives and Pre-professional Experiences

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At-risk students face many personal and structural barriers to academic success. Interventions that address students' educational and social-emotional needs are desirable from both a social justice and practical perspective. NYS Liberty Partnerships Program (LPP) was developed to maximize the successful transition of middle and high school students to higher education and beyond through partnerships with public school districts and postsecondary institutions. The LPP initiative developed/implemented by Iona College is in collaboration with the Yonkers, NY public schools. The Yonkers district comprises high-poverty, inner city schools that have been designated by the NYS Education Department as among the lowest performing, highest priority schools in the state. Iona's LPP provides innovative programming for racially/ethnically diverse student participants. Psychosocial and educational interventions include: academic programs; college/career exploration; interactive technology; training/employment opportunities; and parent engagement activities. Iona's LPP takes a multi-faceted approach offering enrichment activities in: computer science/gaming; entrepreneurial/business; media; science, technology, engineering, and math (STEAM); and a medical magnet program. Other programming includes push-in classroom support, standardized test preparation, homework assistance, clubs, interactive workshops, and field trips. Moreover, pre-professional practical experiences for Iona undergraduate and graduate students majoring in education and psychology are integrated throughout LPP programming. Under professional supervision, Iona students participate in many of the interventions noted above to provide tutoring, mentoring, and counseling for Yonkers students. Program assessment quantitative and qualitative indicators are encouraging. Data for at-risk LPP students show graduation rates and other academic indices above means for non-participating students, and students self-report high satisfaction with the program. An assessment of the pedagogical benefits to Iona students providing LPP support services indicates that students feel their LPP experiences developed their skills and enhanced their professional and career competencies. The LPP is an innovative program that serves at-risk students and enhances the pedagogy of undergraduate and graduate training.

Keywords: *at-risk students, school/higher education partnerships, academic success*

Introduction

At-risk students face many personal and structural barriers to academic success. These barriers include under-resourced schools; poverty; lack of community support; and low expectations for success that students set for themselves, as well as the expectations that parents and teachers hold (Carpenter, Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2004; Larrance, 2007). Ingrained attitudes and poor academic achievement can limit the potential for higher education and career success and is a cause for national concern (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Thornburgh, 2006). Thus, interventions that address students' educational and social-emotional needs are desirable from both a social justice and practical perspective. One such initiative, the New York State Liberty Partnerships Program, was created to help at-risk students reach their academic potential.

Liberty Partnerships Program

The Liberty Partnerships Program (LPP) is a grant-funded initiative that was developed to maximize the successful transition of middle and high school students to the demands of higher education and beyond, through partnerships with community-based school districts and postsecondary institutions. In 1988, LPP was established as part of New York State Education Law to address the significant dropout rate among New York's youth. The legislation states "the failure of many young New Yorkers to complete their secondary education limits their opportunity for a life of fulfillment, prevents them from advancing into postsecondary education, and hinders the State's efforts to provide a well-trained workforce for business and industry in New York" (New York State Education Department Liberty Partnerships Program, 2020).

LPP offers comprehensive pre-college dropout prevention programs to youth in urban, rural, and suburban communities providing services for grades 5-12. These programs are designed to improve students' ability to graduate from high school and enter postsecondary education and the workforce. Funding is provided to partner institutions of higher education to implement program initiatives. These initiatives include educational, cultural enrichment, and recreational programs.

Eligibility Guidelines for At-risk Students

Basic eligibility for participation in LPP includes that the student must be: a New York State resident; enrolled in grade 5-12 or under 20 and enrolled in a GED program; attending an approved educational program; and at risk of dropping out of school as measured using a prescribed rubric. Specifically, students are assessed to be at-risk if they meet one or more of the following criteria: unsatisfactory academic performance; inconsistent school attendance or truancy; history of behavior/discipline problems; history of family/peers dropping out of school; negative change in family circumstances; history of child abuse or

neglect; homeless/resident in a shelter or foster care; history of substance abuse; limited English proficiency; teenage pregnancy and/or parenting; or negative peer pressure (New York State Education Department Liberty Partnerships Program, 2020). These students are often members of impoverished families with adults who have been unsuccessful at obtaining higher education. Resiliency assessment and intervention form the basis for personal learning plans, which are developed for each student in the program.

LPP at Iona College

Research suggests that mentorship, parental involvement, and connections with community-based programs are effective strategies when working with at-risk students (Epstein, 1987; Lindt & Blair, 2017; Larrance, 2007; Thorkildsen & Stein, 1998). The LPP initiative developed and implemented by Iona College in collaboration with the Yonkers, New York public schools endeavors to incorporate these key elements. The Yonkers district comprises high-poverty (68% of students meet U.S. Federal guidelines for free/reduced lunch), inner city schools that have been designated by the NYS Education Department as among the lowest performing (failing), highest priority schools in the state. Iona's LPP has delivered innovative programming for students in five Yonkers schools, two middle schools and three high schools; approximately 350-400 students annually are participating or have participated in LPP during 2017-2021. Across the LPP-participating schools, 59-66% of the student body is Hispanic, 24-28% is Black, 5-9% is White, and 2-4% is Asian. LPP funding is provided for a number of psychosocial and educational interventions.

Iona's LPP program offers a variety of services to at-risk students in the domains of academic support, counseling, enrichment activities in specialized fields, and parental involvement. LPP programming includes: educational, cultural, and recreational programs offered in after-school, extended day, and summer formats; college and career exploration; interactive technology; after-school and summer training and employment opportunities; parent engagement activities; and innovative practice initiatives among administrators, teachers, counselors, and other practitioners. Enrichment activities in specialized fields include: computer science/gaming, entrepreneurial/business, media, STEAM, and a medical magnet program. Other programming includes push-in classroom support, standardized test preparation, homework assistance, clubs, interactive workshops, and field trips.

Academic Services

Academic programming includes push-in classroom support, particularly at the middle school level. Iona College undergraduate and graduate students work under the guidance of the classroom teacher, offering additional assistance to individual students or providing educational support to small groups of students as

needed. Iona students also offer homework support and test preparation, including regent's exam and SAT/ACT standardized tests. These services are offered both during the school day as well as after school in order to increase student ability to participate. More recently, the Iona College LPP program established a college link English course, allowing students to take the course free of charge and earn three college credits.

Specialized Enrichment Activities

LPP students also participate in high-impact interactive workshops, field trips, project presentations, and specialized competitions. For instance, high school students in the computer science/gaming club participated in a gaming competition sponsored by New York University. LPP also arranged for these students to have a field trip to the Microsoft Headquarters in New York City. In addition, students in the Yonkers media classes were invited to the Iona campus, where they engaged in hands-on activities in Iona's broadcast studio and radio station. They were able to host a mock talk show with some students working the equipment behind the scenes while others served as talk show hosts and guests. Yonkers medical magnet students attended the Adelphi University "Mentors in Medicine" program, where faculty highlighted various health related professions. These students also visited the Westchester Educational Opportunity Center for an overview of medical training programs.

Summer STEAM Institute

LPP developed and implemented STEAM activities (the integration of the traditional academic fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math with the Arts) during a week-long summer institute at Iona College with high needs middle school students (entering grades 6, 7, and 8). An interdisciplinary team of educators, as well as motivated undergraduate and graduate college students, lead various STEAM activities. Students completed Alien Rescue, a problem based learning program developed by Liu (2020). With the assistance of math and social studies teachers, the students learned how to use various library resources and electronic databases in order to complete the Alien Rescue mission. An art teacher assisted the students in developing an art project related to the Alien Rescue activities, a comic strip depicting the alien's journey. The summer institute culminated with the middle school students presenting their findings and art work to their parents and a field trip to the New York City Planetarium.

Social-Emotional Development

LPP also supports the social-emotional needs of the students served. All students are assessed utilizing a resiliency assessment. The results of this

assessment are utilized in developing a Personal Learning Plan (PLP) with each student. Students scoring low in resiliency are provided with intervention designed to improve adaptability. The PLP is updated yearly to reflect the progress students make. Furthermore, a licensed Mental Health Counselor provides both individual and group counseling sessions as needed. She is assisted by graduate students from the health professions.

College Preparation

LPP collaborates with Yonkers Partners in Education (YPIE) in delivering services geared to increasing post-secondary education. The YPIE Fellows Program supports students in the college application process, preparing for the SAT/ACT, and navigating financial aid procedures. One-on-one college advising helps students identify possible schools and areas of study. Visits to college campuses enable students to further refine their list of possible institutions. Persistence coaches maintain contact with students for up to two years following their high school graduation in order to ensure college completion.

Iona College Student Tutors, Mentors, and Counselors

Research suggests that experiential learning opportunities impact psychology students in a significant and positive way (Goodman, Liang, Helms, Latta, Sparks, & Weintraub, 2004; Pearrow & Fallon, 2019). Notably, field-based service learning experiences like LPP promote socially just “best practices” and increase students’ commitment to social justice advocacy in their future careers (Caldwell & Vera, 2010). Moreover, Costigan (2020) notes that community based projects related to equity, diversity, and social justice enhance student learning in these domains because these principles are experienced first-hand rather than learned in an abstract way. In keeping with these best practices, pre-professional practical experiences for Iona undergraduate and graduate students majoring in education and psychology are integrated throughout LPP programming. Under professional supervision, Iona students participate in many of the interventions noted above to provide tutoring, mentoring, and counseling for Yonkers students.

Program Effectiveness Indicators

Data for the at-risk students who have participated in LPP show graduation rates and other academic indices above the mean of non-participating students (see Table 1). In addition, LPP students self-report high satisfaction with the program. Ratings were provided on: help developing college list, campus visits, application assistance, SAT prep, and financial aid/FAFSA assistance. Over 95% of students were extremely satisfied with the support received in these areas.

Table 1. Graduation Rate Comparisons

	Gorton High School	Riverside High School	Roosevelt High School	Iona College LPP
Graduation Rate	82%	82%	88%	97%

Iona Students – Survey Results

A survey developed to assess the pedagogical benefits to students providing LPP support services was completed by Iona student mentors/tutors/counselors. The survey assessed Iona students’ evaluation of their LPP experiences on several dimensions such as enhancement of professional skills, usefulness for professional/career development, and personal fulfillment. Students also rated their level of training and support, likelihood to recommend the program to other students, and overall satisfaction with their LPP experience. See the survey, which appears in the Appendix. Table 2 displays survey results for the seven Likert-type response items. Overall, ratings indicate that students viewed their LPP experience as very positive. Students responded to an additional item: “I would rate my overall experience with the LPP program as: *Poor/unsatisfactory, Fair, Good, Excellent*. For this item, 89% of students responded *excellent* and 11% responded *good*. Students commented that their LPP experiences developed their collaboration, communication, organizational, and leadership skills. Taken together, these results indicate that Iona undergraduate and graduate students feel that their LPP experiences developed their skills and enhanced their professional and career competencies.

Table 2. LPP Program Participant Survey

Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Participation enhanced professional skill	89%	11%		
Participation useful for professional/career development	89%	11%		
Participation was personally fulfilling	67%	33%		
Received appropriate level of training for role	67%	33%		
Received appropriate level of support in carrying out duties	67%	33%		
Would participate in LPP again	78%	22%		
Would recommend LPP to others	78%	22%		

Conclusion

According to New York State’s most recent published data (2016-2017), LPP program evaluation revealed positive and compelling results. Some of the more salient outcomes from the evaluation include the following. For the over 14,000 at-risk, middle and high school students who received services through LPP, there

was a positive relationship between LPP participation and improved classroom grades, standardized exam scores, and school attendance (New York State Education Department Liberty Partnerships Program, 2020). With its emphasis on collaboration between higher education institutions, public schools, and community stakeholders; parent engagement; youth development/youth leadership; and service delivery systems designed to meet the needs of families, the Liberty Partnerships Program is leading the way toward increased levels of success for at-risk students.

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Appendix: LPP Survey of Iona Student Mentors/Tutors/Counselors

1. **What was your role/position (check all that apply):**

Tutor Mentor Counselor Graduate student
Undergraduate student

2. **Location where you worked (check all that apply):**

Iona Gorton HS Riverside HS Roosevelt HS
Dodson MLK School 29

For questions 3-10, select the one response that best indicates your agreement/response to the statement.

3. **My participation in LPP enhanced my professional skills.**

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

Which skills were developed?

4. **My participation in LPP was useful for my professional /career development.**

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

Provide some examples of the way your LPP participation is useful for you professionally.

5. **My participation in LPP was personally fulfilling/satisfying.**

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

6. **I received effective/appropriate level of training for my role in the LPP program.**

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

7. **I received an appropriate level of support in carrying out my duties/tasks.**

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

8. **If I had the chance to participate in LPP in the future, I would do it again.**

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

9. **I would recommend other students participate in LPP.**

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

10. **I would rate my overall experience with the LPP program as:**

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

11. **How could the LPP program be improved?**