

High Quality Youth Development & College Access Programs: summary of impacts and costs

Ken Thompson, Senior Program Officer
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Pacific Northwest Program

These are my reflections, informed by our own and our grantees' evaluations, of over 10 years of work with over 200 youth development organizations in Washington and Oregon. This is a high-level summary of *typical* impacts of high quality programs as of about 3 years ago, and the individual organizations mentioned likely will have different approaches to describing the costs and impacts of their specific programs than I put forward here.

SUMMARY: Relatively few programs have enough evidence to call them 'high quality' at this time. Those that are discussed here all serve high need populations, and produce high quality results, including near 100% high school graduation rates and very high college access rates. Their program designs vary in terms of comprehensiveness, as well as in duration – and therefore cost. More comprehensive high quality programs cost between \$3,500/student/year and \$10,000/student/year. One high quality, targeted senior-year-only, college advising program examined here costs \$250/student.

Characteristics of Programs Summarized:

Populations Served:

All programs specifically mentioned here are exclusively (or overwhelmingly) serving low-income kids of color. Programs mainly target an average-lower academically achieving mix of students (in other words, their good academic results are not due to “creaming” or only accepting academically advanced students).

Defining Quality:

Although I've seen some 200 youth development programs up close, I'm only reporting here on the impacts (and costs) of high quality programs. In my experience, at most 20% of youth development efforts are high quality – but although a minority, they do prove significant student outcomes are possible. High quality in this memo is defined by having proof of attaining significant youth outcomes – in this case, education outcomes – verified by rigorous studies that compare how students do in the intervention to other similar students not in the intervention. More organizations than those named here are likely high quality; these, though, are the few where I am directly aware of their program-specific evaluations of student impact, and I believe their results could be considered representative of what's possible in any high quality program.

There are other methods available to quantify quality of youth programs. These rely on more general assessments of program design characteristics, rather than evaluations of youth outcomes. Recently these methods have gotten more sophisticated and soon may be as useful as individual program evaluations of student outcomes.

Duration and Dosage:

In addition to program design characteristics, program duration, and frequency of participation (dosage) are key elements that lead to student outcomes. A weekly interaction is the minimum in

the programs discussed here. However, there is a wide range in the duration of programs I comment on here – from 7+ years to 1 year. (this factor has a large bearing on total cost/student/impact). In addition, impacts reported here are for youth who complete the program. However, most of these programs have very high retention and completion rates (typically 90% or more).

Program Impacts:

High School-age ‘comprehensive’ youth development program approach:

This approach targets the academic and non-academic needs of the student, and some involve family supports as well. These programs show very significant high school completion rates (frequently twice the graduation rates of similar students) at nearly 100% graduation in most cases. Most have nearly 100% of students going on to college (which is about 3x the rate of similar students). Few have tracked results all the way through college completion, but those that have are showing very high completion rates.

Rainier Scholars (Seattle) www.rainierscholars.org

- 100% grade promotion in private schools/advanced public school programs.
- 100% college attendance for first cohorts & very high persistence rates
- Clients: ~200 low and middle income, students of color
- Starts 5th grade; continues through college

Summer Search Seattle (Seattle/King County) www.summersearch.org

- 100% grade promotion and HS graduation; 96% college completion
- Clients: ~100 low-income students of color, first generation college
- Summer Search also operates in other cities around the US
- Start 11th grade; continues through college

SEI (Portland) www.selfenhancement.org

- 98% HS graduation rate; 85% college attendance rate or family wage job placement.
- Clients: ~700 low-income African-American students, first generation college
- Starts 5th grade; continues through college

Native American Youth & Family Center (Portland) www.nayapdx.org

- HS Advocacy program for struggling students: ~75% HS graduation rate
- Clients: ~100, low-income, Native American youth, first generation college
- Starts 9th grade

Portland YouthBuilders www.pybpdx.org

- 100% GED or diploma; 85% go on to college or work (mainly work)
- Re-engagement program; widely viewed as best YouthBuild program in the US.
- Clients: ~200, low-income ‘dropouts’, mainly students of color
- Re-engages HS dropouts and near-drop outs

Targeted College Advising Approach

We've funded fewer efforts in this area, and so have only one effort to report evaluation findings on. This approach just focuses on the final year of high school and on the college application process. The one we have data on shows large impacts on HS graduation rates, modest impacts on college enrollment rates, but then good college completion rates for those that get to college.

UW Dream Project (Seattle/South King County) www.washington.edu/dreamproject/

- Preliminary results: 15-20% increase in HS graduation rates compared to similar students (5 year program graduation rate is 95%). College enrollment – all students ever, 60%; College completion shows a 15-40% increase (for example: Renton Schools graduates have 50% completion instead of 35%; Seattle Schools 65% vs 25%).
- serving 2000 students in 16 sites
- 1 year intervention (start late junior year)

Program Costs

Comprehensive high school-age programs:

There are a range of annual costs associated with these approaches. The lowest of the programs mentioned here is \$3,500/student annually. A more typical cost would be \$7,000/student annually, with the upper end being near \$10,000/student annually. Usually the middle and high school years are at this higher cost, and if there are continued supports once the student is in college, there are lower cost and lighter touch 'alumni' programs.

Given that all of these programs are multi-year, it's necessary to multiply out the annual cost by the life of the program needed to get to the desired impacts. Thus, the range of costs could range from \$15,000 per high school completion for a program that starts in 11th grade, up to \$70,000 per high school completion for efforts that start in 5th grade.

Since most of these programs also secure college enrollment for nearly all of their HS graduates, the cost of enrollment would be about the same as cost of HS graduation. We lack enough evidence to speak about cost of program relative to college completion at this time.

Targeted college advising program:

Dream Project costs \$250 per student served. The program lasts only one year, so the total loaded life of program cost/student is also \$250 for each high school completion. They attain this low rate by utilizing UW students in their work with HS seniors.