

# Researchers empower parents to inspire first-generation college-goers

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Parents who have not attended college are at a disadvantage when it comes to talking about higher education with their kids – yet these are the students who most need a parent's guidance.

A new approach developed and tested by researchers at University of the Pacific's Gladys L. Benerd School of Education may help solve the problem. It was presented today at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association.

"There is a common perception that low-income parents don't care about college, but it's not true," said Ronald Hallett, assistant professor of education at University of the Pacific in Stockton, Calif., and lead researcher on the project. "The parents we worked with really wanted to be engaged in their kids' educational pursuits – in fact they came to us and asked us for help."

One mother told Hallett: "Our parents never had this opportunity and never really understood how to talk to us about college. We want to be able to talk to our [students](#)."

The first in his own family to go to college, Hallett accepted the challenge. He designed a five-week summer program for underserved and underperforming Stockton students in partnership with local school district administrators. Stockton has one of the lowest rates of educational attainment of any major metropolitan area in the nation with only 17.7 percent of residents having a college education. At the

elementary school level, only one in three third-graders can read proficiently.

The program sought out students with academic potential who did not appear to be college bound. Called Creating Opportunities Via Education, it ran for three summers from 2009 to 2011 and served as a laboratory for testing and refining approaches to empower parents to guide their kids on the path to college.

An average of 37 students participated each year. The program was staffed by University of the Pacific doctoral students and a cadre of student peer mentors from a Stockton high school. The annual program cost was \$15,000, shared by the university and Stockton's Lincoln Unified School District.

Students attended three-hour sessions three days a week, exploring college websites, visiting college campuses and learning about college entrance requirements. The program also included family information meetings and gave parents weekly themed activity packets to help them lead conversations about preparing for college. At the end of each conversation, parents and students together drafted specific goals. The goals were incorporated into a family action plan at the end of the program.

Among the lessons learned:

- How to pay for college was the top concern for most parents.
- Parents were reluctant to encourage their children to pursue a goal that might be unattainable; they first needed assurance that college could be financially feasible.
- Large group presentations overwhelmed parents. Individualized attention and guidance better satisfied the complex information needs of low-income families.

- Parents preferred hard-copy written information to emails and blogs, and felt more empowered when information was delivered directly to them rather than sent home via students.
- Parents were more engaged when they helped their student write a college action plan versus reviewing one developed by the student.
- When given effective tools to help underserved and underperforming students prepare for college, [parents](#) use them.

Hallett employed a research model known as the Action Inquiry Model, in which researchers partner with community members to develop and test solutions to social problems in real-world settings. The aim is to create "actionable knowledge" that can inform both policymaking and future research.

While the study did not set out to measure college enrollment, Hallett said that every high school senior in the program who wanted to go to [college](#) has achieved that goal.

Two students whom Hallett personally mentored are now at Pepperdine University in Malibu and California State University, Fresno.

Provided by University of the Pacific

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