Digital Inequality and College Access:
The Case for "Connect to College Now"

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Introduction

The role and importance of information technology in cultivating the 21st Century college student and ultimately a digital citizen is profoundly clear. It is especially clear for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who—with already limited college access— try to engage and navigate the complex college-going process. We define college access as students and families having the awareness, opportunities, support and financing that positively informs postsecondary decisions. For many, advances in technology and digital media have empowered users to access information and tools that help determine a postsecondary path that is the "right fit". Yet for many others, (primarily from urban and rural communities, first generation college goers, low-income backgrounds, single parent homes, etc.), digital inequality widens the current education gap, reduces the opportunity for further education, and impedes the benefits associated with higher educational attainment such as: economic mobility, meaningful civic engagement, health, income, etc. As you will see illustrated by the following report, home broadband access provides the opportunity to connect students with higher education, particularly when supports are given that ameliorate issues of digital inequality—particularly in low-income communities.

Connect to College Now

In October of 2012, partners OneCommunity, Mobile Citizen, College Now of Greater Cleveland, Esperanza, The Ashbury Senior Computer Community Center, RET3 Job Corp and the Cleveland Housing Network joined together with grant support from the Time Warner/Cleveland City Council Neighborhood Technology Fund of the Cleveland Foundation, to create a digital literacy program aimed at providing parents of Cleveland Municipal School District students (particularly those in grades 8-12) with free home computers and low-cost home broadband Internet access. It was the goal of this project to equip and connect these families, increase their awareness of school-related online resources and later track the impact of this effort on college readiness competencies. Since beginning this project, the Connect to College Now program has served more than 400 participants and provided over 800 hours of digital literacy orientation. Through these efforts, the Connect to College Now program has enabled previously unconnected, underserved parents to better support their child's college and career planning objectives as well as aided some digitally naïve, low-income college-bound adults to navigate the complexities of the college process.

In May of 2013, with support from Hobsons, OneCommunity developed and carried out a phone survey in an effort to learn more about the impact on previously unconnected and underserved parents of adding a home computer and broadband connection in their home. Of particular interest was learning about the reported changes to the students' behaviors and college-prep activities. Out of the 467 total program participants, 215 completed a survey (46% of all program participants).   The participants of this program fall into one of three categories: college-bound adults, parents of high school (8-12) students, and parents of K-7 students. The

215 completed surveys represent: 100 college-bound adults, 63 high school parents, and 52 K-7 parents. It is important to note that many more students were impacted than parents because many participating parents have multiple students living in their home

What follows is a brief summary of the parent focused (grades 8-12) findings of this survey.

The Connect to College Now Survey:

Parent College Expectations

While students acquire their personal value of college from many places; their teachers, friends, societal pressures and more, having a person close to them may make them more likely to think about college in a meaningful way by providing them with the needed social supports to navigate the waters of college preparation. However, our survey revealed that only 24% of high school students live in a household where someone has been to college and only 40% of those adults had completed their degree. This means that more than 75% of high school students from the families surveyed will be first-generation college students who lack a personal connection to someone directly familiar with the college preparation and application process. This finding illuminates the value of home access to college preparatory resources through broadband internet which provides immediate and timely access to information and the necessary supports needed to better prepare for and access college such as online classes, supplemental instruction, and research opportunities. Research abounds suggesting that families with little college going experience may need additional supports to help first-generation students fully engage in college readiness and access activities (Pisapa and Perlman, 1992).

Regardless of the parent's college experiences or lack thereof, survey findings show that **95%** of parents believe that a college degree is a necessary component of their child's education for career success. Moreover, **98%** of parents report their students to be college-bound, and **71**% of parents' report that their student plans to attend a 4-year college institution (Fig.1). Additionally interesting, and perhaps reflective of recent educational marketing efforts, **76%** of high school parents report that their students are planning on entering a STEM field in college.
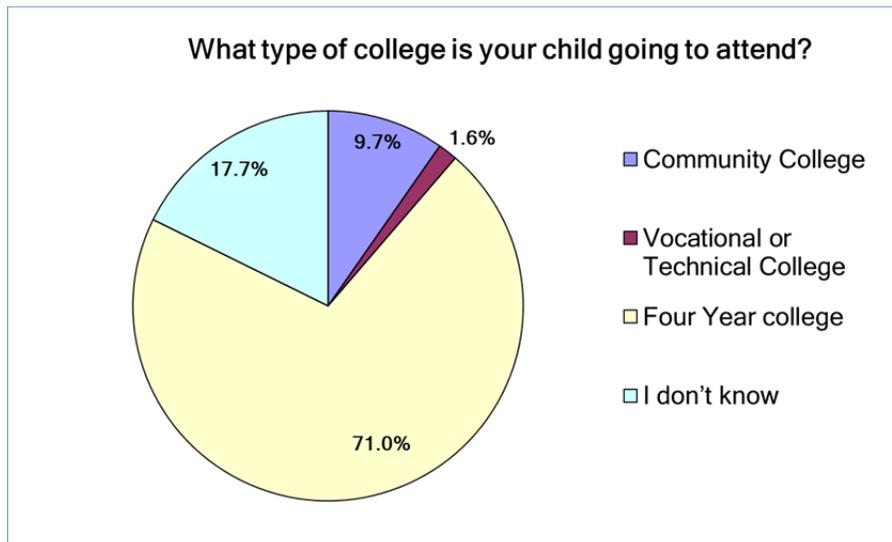

What type of college is your child going to attend?

9.7% 1.6%
17.7%
71.0%

- Community College
- Vocational or Technical College
- Four Year college
- I don't know

Figure 1

Parents' expectation of college going is indeed very promising, but the reality is that many students and parents will face challenges if they are not digitally enabled prior to the transition from high school to college (Venegas, 2007). With the use of technology in the college admissions process becoming standard practice by most higher education institutions, students who are less familiar with technology may be at a significant disadvantage. When students arrive on campus, their need to be digitally literate grows exponentially, as virtually every college process entails the use of technology—from registering for orientation, classes, meal plans, and roommates (Chingos,

Bowen, Lack, 2013)—to submitting assignments in various learning management systems, checking grades, requesting transcripts and scheduling appointments with academic advisors. By providing parents with home computers and home internet access, the Connect to College Now initiative was able to provide parents and their college bound students with the tools necessary to ensure that they can digitally transition from high school to college and position them for utilizing all of the requisite online college resources. To illustrate this point, our survey research shows that students increased online homework and schoolwork activities by 9% with the introduction of a home computer and home internet access. Also, 86% of the parents shared that their student was spending anywhere from one to ten hours a week researching college or career opportunities. Equally important, 70% of parents reported that their own online activities (accessing college websites, researching scholarship information, and utilizing online college and career planning tools) increased after adding home broadband. These parents and students are positioned to leverage the benefits of being connected as their student transitions from high school to college and participate on equal ground.

Student Use of Home Broadband Internet

With college in the sights of so many high school students (and parents), not only is online access useful for researching and performing homework assignments (a precursor to college planning) being able to easily research financial aid, majors and potential careers is important to a family's ability to have and extend meaningful dialogues surrounding college planning (Pisapa and Perlman, 1992). Prior to participating in the Connect to College Now program and receiving home broadband through Mobile Citizen, 73% of survey participants reported that the primary way students accessed the internet was through the library. Considering the limited hours that the library is open, the time limits on individual use of computers (most often between 30min and 1 hour), and the need to arrange for transportation

to and from the library (in the event that the family residence is not within walking distance) the use of

libraries while a valuable community resource, falls short of meeting the needs of college-bound

students who we found to spend upwards of 10 hours each week researching college and career

opportunities (Fig.2). Karen Mossberger, author of *Digital Cities, The Internet and the Geography of*

Opportunity (Karen Mossberger, 2013) agrees; "While libraries and other public access sites are now

available in many urban neighborhoods, students without regular access at home have limited time to

do homework because of waiting times and limited hours of availability, and this problem is greatest in

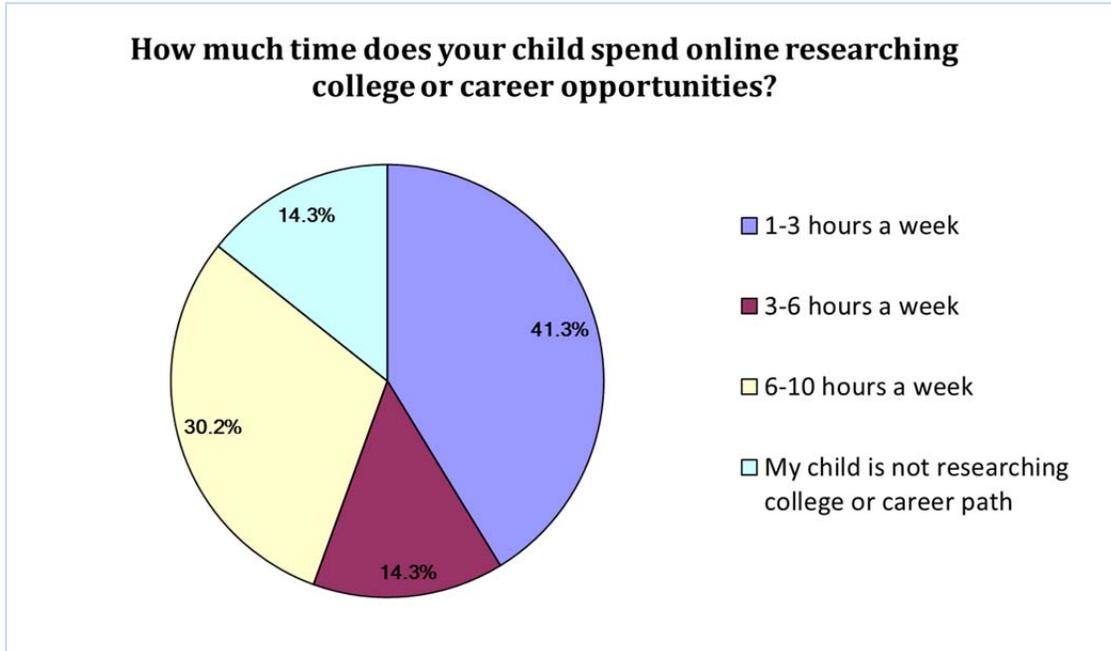urban areas, according to a recent nationwide library survey".

Figure 2

Resources for College Preparation

To compare parents use and awareness of college preparation resources and tools, we asked about

three specific resources that are available to them.   First, we asked parents about their student's use of

College Now Advisors and resources provided to students by College Now of Greater Cleveland which was the first college access organization in the nation and serves approximately 20,000 students each year. Advisors are placed in schools to provide extensive guidance and counseling on all aspects related to the college going process. According to survey findings, 77% of all high school parents were aware of College Now services (59% reported their student was utilizing the services). Next, we asked about parent's awareness of the FAFSA. The FAFSA, which stands for Free Application for Federal Student Aid, is an online form for current and prospective college students to determine their eligibility for student financial aid. According to survey findings, all of the parents were familiar with the FAFSA with 69% reporting that they had completed a FAFSA in the past. Last, we asked about Naviance Family Connection which is a parent-facing portal that provides parents information and assistance to submit a FAFSA, explore scholarship opportunities, and look for colleges that fit the students' and family's needs. For those parents who reported using the Naviance tool, each and every one rated the components of the application a 5 out of 5 – the highest satisfaction score possible across the board.

Conclusion

Reducing overall digital inequality will aid in shrinking the educational attainment gap and level the playing field for college bound students that come from underserved communities. Connect to College Now was an exploratory initiative that analyzed the relationships between broadband access, online tools and resources and underserved (low-income) students and families on a college trajectory in an effort to better understand the role of information technology in preparing students for post-secondary educational opportunities. This endeavor provided insight to and highlighted the importance of online access and tools in closing the education gap and reducing inequalities in the classroom. Applications like Naviance provide the ideal platform for introducing students and families to the opportunities of postsecondary education, and provide the necessary tools for college and career planning, but more

work needs to be done in raising awareness of such supports at the school level. Future activities and

research must be done to determine how we can strengthen parental engagement in digital literacy

efforts (Hargittai, 2008) that would ultimately support the use of tools like Naviance by both students

and families.

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