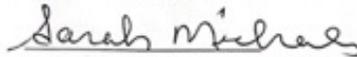


**The College Knowledge Program**

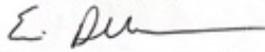
**Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth,  
and Education Studies Major at Clark University**

**Emily S. Dorsey**

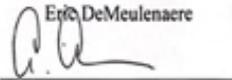
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Worcester, MA

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, conversations around the accessibility of college have centered on admissions and the financial burden of higher education. While these are extremely important and relevant regarding college, there has been a lack of discussion around college readiness and the knowledge that is expected from students to know prior and during college. The inequality that is access to college readiness I myself have experiences as a first-generation college student. Preparing students and supporting them throughout the entire college process is crucial and led to the development of the College Knowledge Program.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank my thesis committee, Andrea Allen, Eric Demeulenaere, and my advisor Sarah Michaels. I would also like to thank my research partner Olivia Shull who I have worked with for four years to develop what is now the College Knowledge Program. I am grateful for the support I have received from my Community, Youth, and Education Studies peers who have been on this journey with me for the past year and a half. I am also grateful for my peer, roommate, and lifelong friend Grace Smith for brainstorming, reading, and supporting me throughout this process. Another supporter I want to thank are my parents and family as without them coming to Clark University would not have been possible. My mom is my number one fan and that has carried me to be able to get to this point. Lastly, I am so grateful for the opportunity to work with the juniors and seniors of Worcester Public Schools over the past four years. Without them this program would not have been possible, and I would not be the youth worker I am today.

## Introduction and Research Questions

*When my parents closed the door behind them on move in day my freshman year was the first time I had felt scared for college. As a first-generation college student, the scared feeling I was experiencing was inevitable as I had not allowed myself to think about saying goodbye on move in day. Leading up to this day, I was excited and couldn't wait to start my life in a new place with so many new people. However, everything I was once excited for seemed so daunting now. As orientation ended and the first week of classes started, I finally knew exactly what the saying "a chicken without their head" felt like. Balancing my social life and school proved to be challenging but doable, but what was proving to be the hardest was having confidence in myself as a student. For me this meant making space for myself, asking for help, going to office hours, using resources around me, and overall feeling like I was capable of being in higher education. A couple of weeks into the semester was when I had the first experience that made me feel like I didn't belong in college.*

*In my sociology class we were handed our midterm assignment which was a fifteen-page research paper on any topic we wanted to discuss connecting to the courses learning goals. I looked at this assignment sheet for days having no clue where to start. I kept drafting ideas and making outlines until there seemed to always come a point where I no longer knew where this idea was going. Each time I reached this point, I would get into bed and cry having all the feelings of doubt sitting heavy on me. Giving myself this time to feel, I would then start the process over again until I eventually put together pieces to finish the midterm assignment. I pushed all the feelings I was going through down and never fully dealt with them. How I dealt with this then is not how I today nor how I would suggest students I work with. The reason for this is that the insecurities I had then still make their way back up when dealing with something*

*new while in my undergrad. The biggest example of this has been this thesis. My experience throughout the thesis process is one that brought up a lot of the doubt, fear, and insecurities I had entering college four years ago. While I am proud of where I am today and the work I have done, reflecting on my thesis experience captures for me the growth I have had and still have in the future.*

### ***Foundation for My Work***

When starting to develop what my thesis work would be, the reality of Coronavirus impacted the type of work I wanted to accomplish resulting in several shifts over time. Originally, I identified the problem as being the approach this program has had for students working on the application process. While this was the area of work I had hoped to focus on, I was not able to effectively work towards creating change in the way I anticipated. The fall of 2021 was the primary focus for my praxis site as this semester is when college applications are addressed. As the fall progressed, the number of students who were involved in the program decreased to 3 or fewer students each session. With limited numbers of students my co-researcher and I began to think deeply about our goals and what we wanted to do moving forward. This resulted in shifting our focus to the spring of 2022 — College Knowledge.

### ***What is College Knowledge?***

College Knowledge — “information, formal and informal, stated and unstated, necessary for both gaining admission to and navigating within the post-secondary system” (Holland, 2015).

The definition of college knowledge above highlights the goal of what Olivia and I aimed at providing students with through involvement in this program. Sessions dealt with relevant topics for students to help them navigate college and set them up for success. Many times,

students graduate from high school and think they are prepared to go to college. They have certain expectations and perceptions of what college is and what it entails. Part of this program's mission was to go through some common expectations and discuss how they may have similar and different experiences to their expectations. During sessions we were intentional with inviting guest speakers to join sessions. We had hoped to have various offices, faculty, and student groups from Clark University to join us, however, in the end only Academic Advising and a handful of student groups on campus were able to attend. The goal of having guest speakers was to connect students with well-rounded resources sharing different backgrounds and information. Prior to meeting students, the program's learning units were established with the help of current school counselors in Worcester Public Schools, staff and faculty at Clark University, Olivia, and me. The units are as followed: (1) College 101, (2) Academics and life, (3) Engagement, and (4) Wellness and Resources. While most of these units were addressed, wellness was not its own individual topic but was embedded into other sessions.

Reflecting on my identity as a first-generation college student I began to wonder what would have been beneficial to me after applying to college and beginning this new transition. This thought sparked a series of ideas around a new program that was centered on providing resources, space for questions, open dialogue, and opportunity for students to gain knowledge about higher education while finishing their last semester of their high school careers. As a first-generation college student, I had felt unprepared for college in terms of academics, social life, networking, and understanding the voice I had as a student. Once identifying what I wish I had prior to starting at Clark University, I began researching different aspects of college readiness. With this, Olivia – my co-praxis designer and researcher – and I decided to pursue the creation of our program, College Knowledge.

## ***Research Questions***

As the site for the program developed, the questions I felt best aligned with my work changed as well. I arrived at these questions for my thesis to try and understand and make sense of what happened during College Knowledge sessions for both Olivia and I as mentors, future mentors, and for myself as future school counselor.

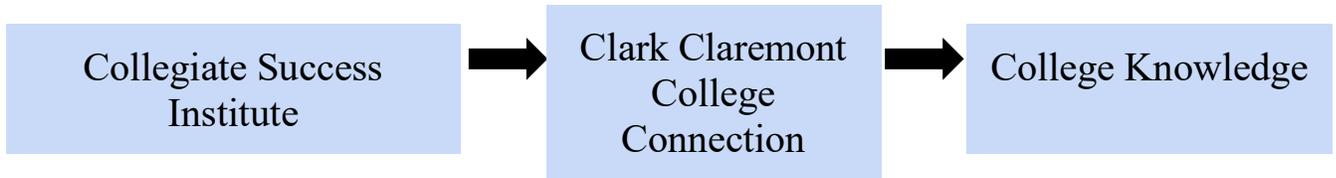
1. What concerns and questions did students express about college (application to entering)?
  - a. How did this relate to our expectations?
2. What did we learn from participants from reflective writing, surveys, and in session dialogue?
  - a. What they liked, what they didn't like, what they did and didn't say — engaging vs. boring, etc.
  - b. Students' feelings
3. What worked and what didn't work? Expectations, disappointments? What did I learn from designing and leading the program that could be important in my career as a school counselor?

To answer these questions, I will be using practitioner inquiry methods to examine our field notes and students' reflective writing (reflections and surveys). Using this method allowed me to ask questions about college access programs such as College Knowledge, collect data, analyze the data, make sense of findings, and share this information for others interested in this topic, future mentors for College Knowledge, and myself as a school counselor focused on college readiness.

## **Ethnographic Context**

In this section I discuss the three distinct stages that the site for my thesis went through. When I first became involved in this work the program was Collegiate Success Institute (CSI) and remained until my third year at Clark when the new program (no longer connected to larger

organizations), Clark Claremont College Connection (CCCC) was created. The need for revamp following the fall of 2021 session of CCCC led to the current College Knowledge Program that my thesis work is centered around, however, including the changes in programs I believe is important in understanding the overall College Knowledge Program that will be discussed in this thesis.



### ***Collegiate Success Institute***

Collegiate Success Institute (CSI) was created in conjunction with MassEdCo to partner Worcester Public Schools with local colleges to provide mentorship to high school students applying to college for the first time, many being first-generation and or students of color. In previous years, CSI has worked with Hanover Insurance to provide funding for the program as well as scholarships to seniors prior to graduating. Mentors for CSI apply through their university and work with a staff member at that university. For the Clark CSI Program, I applied through the Education Department and have worked with Andrea Allen since joining the program in the Spring of 2019 to work with Claremont Academy. At Clark, the CSI program would run from spring to fall with the same students and mentors. In the spring of participants' junior year, CSI would meet twice a week and work as a group to go over college "basics" and begin to introduce the application process, including the college application essay. During the fall semester, their senior year, we continued to meet twice a week, however, the focus of this semester was on college essays and preparing to submit college applications. As a program we strived to have each student be complete or mostly done with their applications around the early admissions deadline in November. Once the program ends in the fall, we continued to be a

support system for students when deciding where to attend and which scholarships to apply for. CSI would continue this structure running from spring to fall up until March of 2022 due to the Coronavirus.

### ***Clark Claremont College Connection***

In 2020 CSI was discontinued by MassEdCO seemingly in response to COVID-19. As a result, a group of Clark University undergraduate students, including myself, created our own branch using previous CSI material called Clark Claremont College Connection (CCCC) working with Claremont Academy students once again. During the Spring of 2021 sessions were conducted over zoom with students rarely turning on their cameras (as was a common practice throughout the Worcester Public Schools). Starting in September 2021, the fall sessions were held in person at Clark University. Monday sessions ran from 3:30-4:30 and took place in a computer lab classroom. This provided each student access to a computer, however, making it very much a traditional classroom setting. During Friday sessions, which took place from 4:30-5:30, meetings were in a large room with more flexible seating, however, no computers. As of our final session in November of 2021, only three students had consistently attended sessions with only one attending Friday sessions. This unexpected barrier for the fall sparked the idea of a new continuation program called College Knowledge.

### ***College Knowledge***

As mentioned earlier, College Knowledge is defined by Olivia and me as, “information, formal and informal, stated and unstated, necessary for both gaining admission to and navigating within the post-secondary system” (Holland, 2015). Compared to past years, this College Knowledge program shifted its focus to working with seniors preparing to transition to higher education. When recruiting for students in Worcester Public Schools, Olivia and I were

connected with Kassandra Garcia, Kassy, who works as a school counselor at both Claremont Academy and University Park Campus School. Kassy was the “middle person” for us as she promoted, followed up, and tracked enrollment for students wanting to participate. This allowed for the school, parents, students, and us as mentors to all know who was involved and ensured permission slips were effectively turned in to the school. When Olivia and I were conceptualizing the College Knowledge Program we decided that the material would be better suited for seniors who had already applied to college. The reason for this was that the main focus of material would be to help students transition from high school to higher education and provide resources, lessons, and tips for this transition. While this was shared to Kassy and was present on recruitment material, a miscommunication arose where College Knowledge was promoted for both juniors and seniors to participate. This did not become apparent to us until a week before College Knowledge's first session in January after the curriculum had been developed. Once meeting students, we realized that there was a mix of both juniors and seniors which brought about a new challenge for us in determining what was best for the whole group. We decided to maintain our developed curriculum, however, we relied on students' responses sharing what they wanted to learn from College Knowledge to help direct us as the weeks went on.

College Knowledge had seven sessions that took place Tuesdays 2:45-4pm and ran from January 25th until March 29th. At our first session on January 25th, 2022, we had a total of eight students. Midway through the program we lost two participants; one had recently started working on weekdays and the other reached out to Olivia stating the program didn't align with their goal of going into theater. Each session would begin with introductions, check-ins from the previous week, and outline for the day. Once we started reflecting on how the program was running, we implemented the addition of writing activities or questions centering around the topics for the day to learn prior knowledge, thoughts, and questions. Following the regular opening agenda, the

main part of the session would start revolving around a specific topic. Topics fit into what we defined as learning units. College Knowledge had four original units; College 101, Academics and College Life, Engagement, and Wellness. Once meeting students and realizing the varying needs due to being at different stages of their high school journey, College Knowledge’s area of focus shifted; College 101, financial aid, resources and academic advising, clubs and engagement, and the college application process.

### The College Knowledge Curriculum

January 25 <sup>th</sup> , 2022	College 101	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Introductions and get to know each other</li> <li>● Explanation of College Knowledge</li> <li>● <i>Your</i> College Journey <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Changing that narrative that college is linear and same for every student</li> <li>- College versus high school</li> <li>- Olivia, Emily, Rhya, and Gaby share own college journeys up to this point</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Circles of Multidimensional Self Activity</li> <li>● Common college terms</li> <li>● Student panel <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Housing</li> <li>- Courses</li> <li>- Academics</li> <li>- Transitioning to college</li> <li>- Involvement on campus</li> <li>- General advice</li> <li>- Questions</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Asking students what they would like to hear</li> <li>● Sent out survey to fill out prior to next session</li> </ul>
February 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2022	College 101 Continued	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Introductions</li> <li>● Ice breaker</li> <li>● Two truths and a lie</li> <li>● Fly swatter college vocab activity</li> <li>● Go over all vocabulary and definitions</li> <li>● Reflection time</li> <li>● Handed out writing reflection</li> </ul>

February 8 <sup>th</sup> , 2022	Financial Aid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Introduction</li> <li>● Opening writing activity</li> <li>● Common financial aid terms slideshow</li> <li>● Financial aid and College Knowledge Bingo</li> <li>● End of session writing reflection</li> </ul>
February 15 <sup>th</sup> , 2022	Academic Advising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Introduction</li> <li>● Opening reflection</li> <li>● Introduction to Academic Advising at Clark University</li> <li>● Academic Advising <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Presentation</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Questions for Academic Advising and thank you</li> <li>● End of session reflection</li> </ul>
March 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2022	Clubs and Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Introduction</li> <li>● Open writing time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Story of your name</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Opening and introduction to clubs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Opening written reflection on clubs</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Student panel <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Model United Nation</li> <li>- Amnesty International</li> <li>- Bee Keeping</li> <li>- FIRM</li> <li>- Dough is Me</li> <li>- Hip Hop</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Sent end of session reflection using Google Survey</li> </ul>
March 15 <sup>th</sup> , 2022	Navigating the college research and application process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Introduction</li> <li>● Presentation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Navigating a college website</li> <li>- Types of colleges and degrees</li> <li>- Target, reach, and safety range for colleges</li> <li>- Majors</li> <li>- What is the Common App?</li> <li>- Essays</li> <li>- Resume samples</li> <li>- Recommendations</li> <li>- Scholarships</li> <li>- Timeline</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Table 1: This table shows the College Knowledge Program curriculum that we based the sessions around.

## **Positionality and Identity**

In what follows I go in depth about how I see myself within the College Knowledge Program in terms of being an insider into this program. I define being an insider as someone who holds knowledge about or that is important to a group, like the College Knowledge Program. I believe that the identities and experiences I have had have impacted who I am within this work.

As mentioned above, I have been a mentor with CSI, and now CCCC, since the spring of 2019 during my first year at Clark. During this time, I have worked alongside my peers with different groups of high school students in varying circumstances. My co-praxis project designer, Olivia Shull and I both became involved in CSI/CCCC during our first year at Clark and have grown together through this program. Over the years my personal, academic, and career goals have changed with me originally joining this program as a future teacher and leaving wanting to be a high school counselor. My involvement with this program has not only allowed me to think about my lived experiences, but also determine what type of work I want to do after my time at Clark. While I will be using this program as a site for my research, I would have still been a part of this program regardless, as I am extremely passionate about providing support for youth through this transition period.

Before coming to Clark University, I had never identified as a first-generation college student. It was a detail I knew about myself and one I would fill in on surveys. However, this part of my identity I didn't put effort into understanding or took pride in. When filling out information regarding my parents' education, I felt a sense of shame checking that my father had a sixth-grade education and my mother a high school diploma. Taking classes and being a part of different programs, such as CSI/CCCC, at Clark, I finally realized not only how proud I was of myself, but also of my mother for all she did to help me be where I am today. Having the

opportunity in college to breakdown my lived experiences allowed me to appreciate my background and where I am today because of these experiences. Today, I proudly identify as being a first-generation college student and this appreciation has helped guide my goals and passions.

Examining my place within my praxis site I consider myself an insider because of two factors. One reason is that I have worked within this program for several semesters, building and creating curriculum. Starting my first year at Clark and with this program our supervisor, Andrea Allen, gave us flexibility in what we wanted to do and what we felt was important for students. Being a part of this program throughout its many changes, has provided me insight into working with students coming from all different places has allowed me to be more familiar and know what to expect more of when starting the College Knowledge Program.

Second, my experiences and identities have allowed me to connect to students who share certain aspects of their own identity with me. When students learn about my learning challenges and being a first-generation college student, there is a level of engagement that has occurred. In the past, students have asked questions regarding my transition to college and how I feel now. Working with youth and connecting with them as a first-generation college student has shaped me into who I am today and the type of youth worker I want to be. Being a first-generation college student is one aspect of my identity; however, one I hold extremely important and has heavily impacted the way I engage with CSI, College Knowledge, and the research I plan to conduct. With my praxis site continuing to change and develop in its goals, purpose, and mission I find myself increasingly drawing on the experiences I have had in both high school and now at Clark. This further adds to my feeling of being an insider through my work at my praxis site.

## Literature Review

In this section I talk through the literature that helped Olivia and I define what we have defined College Knowledge, guided our conceptualization for the program, how making meaning of the literature for the program, and the limitations I found of the existing literature around college knowledge and college readiness.

### *Guiding literature for my work*

The key topics in the literature used for my research is around defining college knowledge, college access, first-generation college students, outside support, and overall, what may be beneficial to students in our program.

### *Beginnings of the College Knowledge Curriculum*

Further work that helped ground the purpose of College Knowledge came from The Boston Globe's series called "The Valedictorian Project." The Boston Globe in 2019 started this series, "The Valedictorian Project," that heard from 93 of the 113 Boston Public Schools valedictorians from the graduating classes of 2005, 2006, and 2007. The goal of the journalism was to interview and learn about the experiences these former valedictorians had after high school. Approximately 80% of these valedictorians identified as "first-generation college students" and over 50% were born outside of the United States. After high school graduation, 25% did not end up obtaining a bachelor's degree within 6 years, 40% currently make less than \$50,000 a year, and four have been homeless. The question this project asked was "is Boston failing its brightest students?" With these being the real experiences of students seen as "the brightest," The Boston Globe identified eight takeaways: (1) underachieving in higher education compared to what was expected, (2) students from suburbs fare better than those in cities, (3) while almost a quarter wanted to become doctors none had earned a medical degree, (4) bigger

discussion needed around Boston's exam schools and outcomes for students, (5) many students are "doubly disadvantaged" due to financial challenges, (6) these valedictorian students are still vulnerable to homelessness, (7) a need for an effective program to improve college graduation rates, and (8) Boston valedictorians in this piece did not "complain about their disadvantages" and felt better off than others (Boston Globe, 2005).

Students who were interviewed for this project noted feeling lost on campuses, experiencing culture shock, and being extremely overwhelmed. One solution this piece addressed was making first-generation college students feel at home on campus by intentionally cultivating a sense of belonging. Part of doing this is by "treating students like they are part of the university, and you believe they are to be a success" (Boston Globe, 2005). While many strategies in this piece are meant for universities, providing programs to help ease the transition for urban students of color, most being first-generation and low-income students, is beneficial to understanding the need of this work — College Knowledge. This piece directly influenced College Knowledge in terms of choosing learning units.

The first takeaway made by The Boston Globe was that students who were expected to be high achievers in higher education did not meet those expectations. This made me think about what could have better equipped these students prior to starting college. From this point I felt that having a College 101 and Engagement on Campus unit that stressed that college is a unique experience for each student, utilizing the resources around you, and how to start creating a community for yourself while at school would set students up for success by having this prior to entering higher education. Having access to this material I hoped would address the reality. The Boston Globe highlighted students' success and readiness prior and once in college. Overall, this piece helped us identify and understand the realities for many first-generation college students

when entering higher education and the possible benefits this program could provide future students to prevent the failings identified in the Boston Globe's series.

A specific idea for curriculum in our program was based on the work of *College Knowledge* by David Conley (2005). Conley argues for the importance of providing students with examples of various documents such as syllabi, emails to professors, resumes, and essays. Exposing students to common formats they will see allows them to break down different parts and ask questions. This creates familiarity prior to starting college that may be beneficial to participants in our program. Having access to these materials prior to entering higher education may possibly create a greater sense of belonging as a member of a higher education institution. I think of this as "insider knowledge" for students entering college more comfortably and knowing what to expect, even starting on the first day of classes.

During the process of conceptualizing our curriculum, this was an element I felt strongly about including in sessions with seniors, however, once we had our first session of *College Knowledge* it became clear that in the recruiting process, information was not communicated the exact way we intentionally intended resulting in predominantly juniors joining *College Knowledge*. This resulted in Olivia and I deciding not to include documents such as syllabi, emails to professors, and essays as the students' expressed interests and what we felt would be beneficial for them at this stage was no longer the same. Including resumes however remained in *College Knowledge*. This was because having a resume ready that can be updated is very important during the college process and once at college for employment and internship opportunities. Another reason resumes were still included is that when students are made to think about their resume, when asking for teacher recommendations at the end of their junior year, they already have a document to share that will benefit their recommendation.

### ***Making meaning out of existing literature to inform my vision of College Knowledge***

After reviewing the literature discussed above, we knew that for the College Knowledge Program the intention of the curriculum should be to push beyond information and provide knowledge that emphasizes an embodied understanding as well. Using both relevant research on this topic, our own intuitive ideas, and both youth and individual experiences led us to establish four units of learning: (1) College 101: getting ready for college: what to bring, what to expect, (2) academic success, (3) campus Engagement: clubs, extracurriculars, etc., and (4) wellness. These four learning units were established as being important in the program by using both the literature above and areas we felt are not touched on enough in research around college readiness programs. For example, part of College 101 included a session dedicated to financial aid going into terms, our own experiences with financial aid, working while being a student, and points to keep in mind when thinking about financing college. This topic came about using The Boston Globe's series which emphasized the financial part of college and the struggles that students themselves expressed as being important to them. Other areas that our review of the literature drove us to include in College Knowledge was engagement to create your own community, tools and dialogue to help them succeed in college, and having staff from a college come speak to them to introduce them to typical college resources. Wellness was a specific area I wanted to include in College Knowledge as learning to balance and take care of yourself is essential I believe in order to grow and thrive in college. This area in particular I found not to be touched on enough and was something I felt should be included in literature centered around this type of work.

### ***Limitations in the Literature and Filling Gaps With a More Qualitative Approach***

While collecting and reviewing literature to help articulate my focus and understand existing research, I found a great deal of work on outcome measures used for evaluating college access programs. The focus was on retention rates, academic skills, and placement tests results. These measures are more quantitative and post-hoc (after the program was completed) and not helpful for us. However, my goals are to approach college knowledge and “success” of the program based on qualitative data including a consideration of my own and students’ feelings towards it, based on students’ interactions, comments, and written reflections in the moment. By using this approach in both my reasoning for the type of data I collected and the questions asked to students I was able to determine from students themselves if I felt the program could be labeled a “success.” I struggle with the idea of defining myself if the program “worked” or not, however, hearing from students what they learned, gained, and overall thoughts on the program I believe is a crucial part of labeling a program's success. Applying a humanistic view of this college access program that steps beyond quantitative data in determining success of a program is something that is the main reason behind the data that was collected as we did not use “statistics” to determine the program's value. The current standard of research determining success and college readiness is rooted in viewing students as numbers, however, our work viewed each student as an individual. This is evident in the approach to identifying the large takeaways and the emphasis on each student's individual responses.

## **Conceptual Framework: College Knowledge**

This section discusses the College Knowledge Program and how it aims to deal with the lack of cultural capital students may have prior entering higher education. The College Knowledge Program goals were to address this issue by providing access to college readiness.

### ***Cultural Capital and the College Knowledge Program***

To make sense of what college knowledge is I have used *Trusting Each Other: Student-Counselor Relationships in Diverse High Schools* by Megan M. Holland (2015) as a guide. This piece has been helpful in articulating a working definition of College Knowledge. Holland states that students may face disadvantages throughout the college application process as well as navigating higher education due to a lack of college knowledge; college knowledge is defined as "information, formal and informal, stated and unstated, necessary for both gaining admission to and navigating within the post-secondary system" (p. 245). This is true as some students lack access to "dominant forms of cultural capital" (p. 245). Cultural capital is defined by Pierre Bourdieu as the "general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to the next" (MacLeod, 1987, p. 13). This means that children who have not been provided college readiness access and knowledge that is essential to the college process are at a disadvantage because they lack this form of cultural capital. Lacking this type of capital is something I dealt with as a first-generation college student when entering higher education and wanted to address with the College Knowledge Program.

Another aspect this piece discusses is the tendency for there to be a mistrust between counselors and students due to a lack of understanding in terms of expectations and roles (p. 244). For first-generation college students this relationship is important as many youths cannot always rely on family for college information. A main reason for this is due to social capital as

there are “gate-keeping agents” that limit opportunities based on race, class, and gender. These gate-keepers make it so that students who don’t possess knowledge around college at home, which is a form of cultural capital, have a harder time gaining this knowledge. Counselors have the ability to provide knowledge and resources that work against the gate-keeping that occurs limiting the gaining of cultural capital for students navigating higher education. Olivia’s and my curriculum for College Knowledge aims to work against gate-keeping agents in the process of gaining cultural capital as it illuminates areas that may not be known or access to college knowledge is not as accessible.

### ***The Lens of College Knowledge***

In what follows I discuss the College Knowledge Program and how I made sense of what this program entails more deeply.

An aspect of my praxis project I hope to address using CRT as a framework is the potential in lacking knowledge typically held by white middle class students that CCCC participants may not possess due to varying cultural experiences. Through CCCC and the curriculum Olivia Shull and I have created, the overall goal is to provide students with an opportunity to be able to develop “college knowledge.” I previously identified and termed “college knowledge” as the college application process and the process of researching colleges as well as skills and dispositions that are important for success in college. Examples of these skills are asking questions, speaking publicly, speaking up for or advocating for oneself, or writing about one’s own stories or knowledge in ways that are recognized and valued in the academy (like the personal essay in the college application). But with our shift to a program for participants who have already completed their applications, our notion of College Knowledge Program goes beyond just understanding terms and procedures. By “college knowledge,” we also

mean skills and dispositions that are really important for success in college, such as asking questions, speaking publicly, speaking up for or advocating for oneself, or writing about one's own stories or knowledge in ways that are recognized and valued in the academy (like the personal essay in the college application). During the program we addressed the importance of asking questions, utilizing resources, and advocating for yourself as a student. These topics were incorporated throughout sessions and were directly discussed by having the office of Academic Advising speak with students.

### *Summing Up*

I started this work not really knowing what a conceptual framework was and how to effectively make sense of this work. In the beginning I was trying to find frameworks that I felt helped inform my work and articulation of my aspirations for the program. However, understanding the connection between access to capital and the goals I had for the College Knowledge Program allowed me to better articulate and make sense of the work I have done. By providing students with the College Knowledge Program discussion around the acquisition of capital and its importance for entering higher education can be developed and pushed further.

While these frameworks were very beneficial for my thesis in the conceptualization stage of my thesis, when in the height of running the College Knowledge Program I realized that I did not come back to these frameworks as much as I should have. Reflecting now, coming back to Critical Theory and my intentions for the College Knowledge Program would have centered me by bringing me back to why I was doing this work. My primary lens became what we could do as mentors to help the students benefit the most from the College Knowledge Program.

## **Methodology and Methods**

In this section I focus on the method that helped guide my research, Practitioner Inquiry, while starting the research and data collection process. I also discuss the types of data I collected and what those look like for my work.

### ***Practitioner Inquiry***

Practitioner inquiry (PI) is described by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) as a “systematic intentional inquiry by teachers about their own school and classroom work” (Knowles Teacher Initiative). In regard to PI and its use for teachers, “practitioner research is embedded in the teacher’s daily routines” as they gather from students responses to hypothesize and explore analysis (Knowles Teacher Initiative). This work is important as it “supports the continual development of teachers” and is “critical in attracting and keeping the best and brightest people in the profession” (Knowles Teacher Initiative). An aspect of PI is the reality that educators bring their lives, experiences, and multiple perspective-making to their work (i.e., curriculum) “socially and culturally relevant” in the research process (Knowles Teacher Initiative). The outcome for teacher researchers from PI is the hope that they become “empowered teachers to take ownership and confidence on their work” as they become the “knowledgeable others” within university academia who are seen as the main researchers in this type of work.

Sharon M. Ravitch (2014) states that practitioner research is a “methodological approach that allows for theory research-practice integrations through the development of systematic research procedures and practices that foster critical reflection and action in the context of professional practice” (p. 5). This method of research is meant to help researchers create and extend their professional knowledge, skills, ideas, and practices in the area of focus. Those who are interested in this work “seek to improve their own practices” through “purposeful and critical

examination of and reflect on aspects of work” (p. 6). Through this form of inquiry, the hope is to “illuminate and improve practices” to “inform and empower professionals” (p. 6). While reading Ravitch I felt reassured when discovering they were a former school counselor, teacher, and counselor educator and that this form of research resonates with the work they do — similarly to my interest in College Knowledge. If done effectively, this work can push against current research or reality in specific fields. Taking an inquiry stance allows for more “person-centered, systematic and proactive approaches to empowering and advocating” (Ravitch, 2014, p. 7). Practitioner research is conceptualized in this piece as “taking an inquiry stance on practice is a central and vital concept in the realm of practitioner research” (Ravitch, 2014, p. 8).

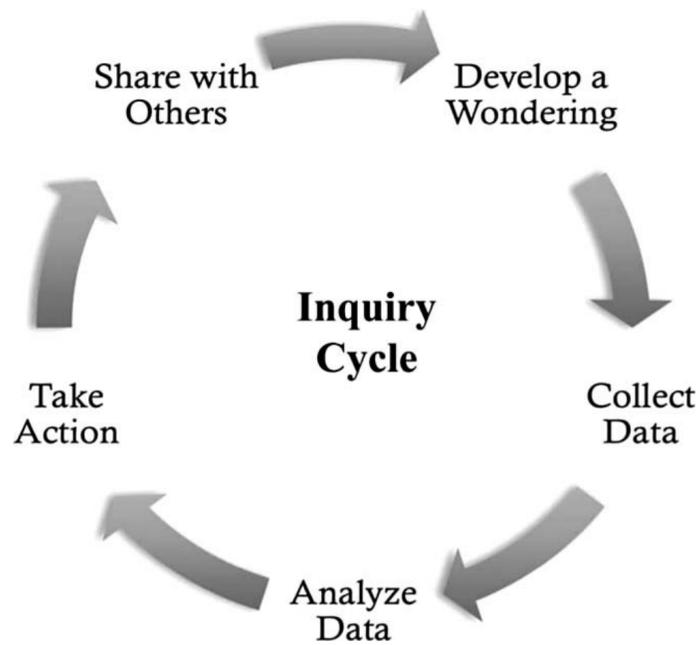


Image 1: This image shows the cycle that the Practitioner Inquiry research method follows and how I was able to make sense of this method.

### *Data Collection*

In this section I breakdown the two types of data I collected for my research and what those looked like specifically for me and the College Knowledge Program. The forms of data collection I used were field notes and written work and will be discussed below.

#### Field Notes:

Every session I wrote field notes by taking notes of what is occurring during each session. After sessions, I wrote my observer comments and points to revisit, reflect on, and areas to discuss with Olivia. Field notes also helped with remembering what occurred during sessions and provide details useful when analyzing other forms of data collection.

#### Written Work:

Surveys, questionnaires, reflections, and short writing exercises were collected and analyzed for each session. All of these forms of data collection allowed us to know what changes should be made to meet students wants and needs, what areas should have greater emphasis or be discussed, and overall feelings towards the program.

### **Approach to Data Analysis**

In this section I explain my process of data analysis, coding to form categories and subcategories for my data, and seeing how those codes fit into what I was hoping to learn from the data I had collected.

#### ***Coding***

Once Olivia and I felt we had collected sufficient data to analyze and make sense of, I began to start the coding process. This part of praxis has been the point of a lot of fear and uncertainty as in the back of my mind I kept feeling “I wasn’t a researcher.” This mindset created mental obstacles for me resulting in uncertainty. However, once I began to refine and put into

words what research questions, I was truly interested in learning more about, I started approaching coding as a way to break down the data that has been collected.

The first step in this process was identifying parts of the data that stood out either by answering questions I found to be important in creating a complete image of College Knowledge or explaining more of what students wanted to express. After going through I made five broad categories to place data into. Once establishing these five main categories I felt that three needed subcategories in order to fully make sense of the data.

Categories and subcategories:

1. Initial wants from program involvement	2. How students feel after session	3. Questions	4. Prior thoughts around topic	5. Checking about program
Concerns about college process	Reflection of activities	Additional questions		
		Prior questions		

Table 2: The categories and subcategories that I used to help start the data analysis process.

Establishing these categories and subcategories helped me break down the data we had collected and see larger themes within them. Using the chart above allowed for students' responses to be placed into categories for me to come back to and make sense of. Once analyzing the data, I began to see where they fit into my research questions. The first being what concerns and questions expressed about college, which there was data to answer this question. My second question dealt with what students learned from College Knowledge; what they did and did not like and how they felt after sessions. Moving to my third question is where I was able to truly make sense of the data, program as a whole, and my reflection on this process.

## **Findings: Making Sense of the Survey Data**

In what follows are the ways I have broken down my findings into different sections to better examine the main findings I found from the College Knowledge Program; what students said they wanted to learn, what they liked and didn't like in the program, how students felt after sessions, and what they learned from the program as a whole.

### ***What Did They Say They Wanted to Learn About?***

This subsection addresses what students expressed to use what they wanted to learn from being a part of this program. Three topics were revealed from their responses with two aligning with my expectations, but one left me with questions about what students in this College Knowledge Program really want to learn about.

When meeting with Olivia to begin developing the curriculum for College Knowledge, we had a mutual belief that it was crucial that we understood students' concerns, questions, and what they hoped to gain from this program. While we both had our own assumptions of what we believed students would want to learn or hear more about during sessions, we recognized these assumptions may not be what they needed or desired. This allowed for us as mentors to not put our own experiences and feelings too much at the center of this program in order to try and meet students' needs to benefit them, not just what we would have wanted to hear if we were in this program. Keeping students at the center of our goals was important to both Olivia and I. While we both wanted to take what we have learned from this program and students' experiences into our future as youth workers, the program is meant for students and creating spaces for students to share their questions and concerns is a large part of doing that.

The first opportunity we had to hear from students about what they were hoping to gain and learn from College Knowledge was during our first session. Our first session took place on

Tuesday, January 25th of 2022. This session consisted of the group getting to meet one another, explain the program's goal, begin with the first topic we were focusing on (*Your College Journey*), and provide time for each student to answer survey questions sent to them via Google Surveys. This session centered around getting to know one another and promoting the idea that their college journey would be unique to each of them. At the end of the session Olivia and I made time for students to ask questions or share any concerns they had in person. While they did not verbally express questions and concerns, when prompted the same question via a Google Survey we created, three themes emerged.

Questions that were asked in the survey:

- What would you like to hear more about?
- Do you have any questions?
- Is there anything you are curious about to learn about regarding the college application, transitioning to college, or anything else?
- Any specific topics you want to learn about?

When reflecting on the questions and concerns students expressed, three topics were revealed; the admissions process, financial aid, and transitioning to college.

Out of the three topics that emerged, only two originally aligned with the expectation I had of what students would want to hear more about in the College Knowledge Program.

Students wanting to learn about the college admissions process and financial aid were both topics I had expected. Both of these topics have been areas that previous students have been eager to work on and in the past have been the main focuses of Collegiate Success Institute and Clark Claremont College Connection. Having worked with high school students from Worcester Public

Schools for four years now as well as being a current college student these were topics, I also had the most questions about.

However, what was surprising at first was that navigating the transition to college was a key topic of concern revealed from their responses. While this topic was one I was also concerned about prior to my first year at Clark, it became more prominent the summer before my first year and my first day on campus. Students' responses that were placed into this theme included facing fear of meeting new people, how to choose a college that's good for you, getting adjusted to college, and making friends. When going through the data, it became apparent that many of the responses dealing with transitioning to college were from the seniors who were in College Knowledge. This finding validated the goals I had for the College Knowledge curriculum as there was a large focus throughout our curriculum to help students prepare for this transition period they were about to go through. Learning that there would be both juniors and seniors in the College Knowledge Program I was unsure what students would want to learn about because I believed that being a second semester senior is a very different place then for juniors who are just starting their college process in terms of applicable college readiness topics (transitioning to college and making friends versus the college applications). For these seniors it made sense to me that they would have more questions about the transition to college versus the application as they have already been through that stage of the college process, whereas for juniors they are just starting.

### *Significance*

Providing an opportunity to hear from students what they wanted to learn about during the first session I believe is a crucial part for the College Knowledge Program. Implementing this connects to College Knowledge as it allows us to learn from them what they think they need the

most material about prior to starting college. While Olivia and I have defined what College Knowledge is, what we believe is important, and developed a curriculum, we still might not have emphasized what students wanted from the program. The goal for the program is to help students prepare for higher education and giving them space to voice what they would like to learn is an important part of doing that. In the future, I believe that understanding and making sense of what students want to learn on day one is necessary and directly connects to the goals for this program.

### ***What Students Liked and Didn't Like (Based on What Students Said During the Program)***

In this section, I discuss what students seemed to like and not like, based on survey responses and observations I had of the group during sessions. I have broken this section into two; games and guest speakers (Clark staff and students).

When developing College Knowledge's curriculum Olivia and I wanted to implement different lesson formats in hopes of engaging students to learn the most from being involved and wanting to continue their participation. Throughout the program, the different lesson formats included dialogue, PowerPoints, student panels, writing activities, games, and guest speakers. As program designers and facilitators, it was important for us to learn from participants what they did and didn't like during their time in College Knowledge for both future facilitations as well as for us as youth workers.

Questions asked via surveys that helped us learn what they did and did not like:

- What did you think about the game?
- Was this session helpful, why or why not?
- What are your initial thoughts about the specific groups that came in to speak with us?

- Did you enjoy having students come in to talk about their clubs/organizations?

Based on an analysis of their responses to these questions, I've organized this in terms of the different kinds of activities we engaged in: Games, Clark Staff Guest Speakers, and Student Speakers (Ourselves Undergraduates and representatives from Student Clubs).

### *Games*

The two games that were incorporated into sessions were a Fly Swatter Vocab Game and Financial Aid Bingo. Our rationale for including games was that they would break up sessions for them to learn as well as be engaged with one another.

### *Fly Swatter*

The fly swatter activity was essentially a vocabulary matching game where Olivia would read a definition that corresponded to a particular college term. The terms were written on two white boards scattered in different orders on both sides. Having students in two groups they would have one team member at a time hear the definition and try to figure out what college term correctly matched the college term.

The Fly Swatter game took place during our second session that focused on college terms and unpacking what each term meant (early action, liberal arts college, major, minor, GPA, etc.). Based on students' responses both in and out of session, reactions to this activity were that most enjoyed this activity. Students used phrases such as "useful/informative", "fun", and "helpful" along with direct answers that I deemed as straightforward such as "I liked the game." One student however when completing a written closing session reflected that "it was boring to me. I didn't know most of the answers. But now I know more." This game is one of the activities that has been a continued part of the curriculum from CSI to College Knowledge. Each semester this

game has been implemented, students' responses in the past reflect what current College Knowledge expressed; overall enjoyment and positive feelings towards activity.

### Bingo

The Financial Aid Bingo Game was set up using a standard bingo game but in each space were financial aid terms. Similarly, to the fly swatter game, a mentor would read a definition out loud and each student would match it to a particular term on their bingo sheet. Students' goal was to correctly match the term to the definition as well as reach “bingo” first.

The session that this bingo activity took place was centered around financial aid. Data regarding students' thoughts towards this activity is limited as only three students were present. Another limitation there is in gaining sense of students' thoughts towards this activity is that unlike the fly swatter game there were no specific questions asking what they felt about the activity. However, during the session students I perceived that they were not nearly as enthusiastic during. Signs of this were lower energy levels. When asked questions at the end of the session to reflect, the activity was not mentioned. This possibly implies again that this activity was not as impactful to them as the fly swatter activity.

### *Students Uniformly Liked the Fly Swatter Game*

The biggest takeaway of what students did and didn't like was that students uniformly liked the fly swatter game. Not only did all but one express that they enjoyed this activity, when asked to reflect on the entire College Knowledge program during the last session this activity was mentioned several times.

### *Significance*

The significance of this finding is not just that this activity was impactful but what this game might suggest about what students enjoy about this activity. This game involved the whole group, teams, had a physical component (standing, circling the vocabulary term, answering speed, and allowed students to use the whiteboard). In the future I would still include games as I believe they are effective at engaging students and providing important information that they will recall. However, I think that games that are included need to be well thought out, like the fly swatter game, and encourage team work as this seemed to be a part of why students enjoyed this game so much.

### *Guest Speakers*

This section is dedicated to the two types of guest speakers we had during the College Knowledge Program; Clark staff from Academic Advising and student speakers (club representatives and College Knowledge mentors).

### *Clark Staff Speakers*

While the goal was to have several offices and professors come speak with students during the session, due to scheduling conflicts only the office of Academic Advising at Clark was able to join us. This session was mainly driven by the guest speakers from this office who offered a presentation that included group discussions, individual activities, and space for students to participate and ask questions. After the session students were asked for their closing session reflection. The specific questions that followed this session were “Was this session with Academic Advising helpful? Why or why not?”, "What was the biggest takeaway for you from having Academic Advising speak with us today?", and “is this an office you could see yourself using as a resource? Why or why not?” The purpose of these questions was to understand what

they did and didn't like about this topic as well as having speakers join sessions. One particular student responded that this session was helpful because "it gave me an idea of who to reach out to for help" and that the survey they filled out to learn about the areas of majors that might interest them was helpful.

### *Student Speakers*

Olivia and I as mentors led our own panel discussing classes, housing, majors, and sharing our experience transitioning to college. Along with this, we had several clubs and organizations come join us during a session. After panels ended, we left time for students to let us know in person whether or not they enjoyed the session or overall thoughts on having current college students speak with them. Knowing that not every student would be comfortable expressing their thoughts in person, paper reflections were once again provided. Questions specifically asking them to reflect on student speakers joining us were "Did you enjoy having students come in to talk about the clubs/organizations they are a part of?" Students' overall consensus was yes, they did enjoy it (students responses in Table 3 below), however, one interesting additional comment was what they (student 8) wanted more of for future sessions; "It was good but I think it should be more speaking what is coming for us next year to prepare for it." While not every student heard from a club that interested them, the overall takeaway was that they did enjoy student speakers as a part of sessions.

Did you enjoy having students come in to talk about the clubs/organizations they are a part of
(Student 8) “It was good but I think it should be more speaking what is coming for us next year to prepare for it”
(Student 3) “Yes”
(Student 2) “I did enjoy it”

Table 3: This table shows the three student responses we received on March 1<sup>st</sup> regarding having student speakers join the College Knowledge Program.

*Significance*

Having speakers join the College Knowledge Program was intended to also break down sessions by not having solely presentations where we, the mentors, speak to students. The hope was that students would gain more about what resources are provided on college campuses (not just Clark) and the various ways they could become engaged on their campuses. While students expressed that they enjoyed having speakers, my observations did not align with what they wrote. In their responses in terms of if they liked it or not. In the future I think having other offices also speak with students, which we attempted, would remain important to the program. With this I think having student speakers is a good addition, however, I think really having specific student groups join may be more successful. We tried to meet all students' interests when inviting groups on campus, however, I think having less groups and more specific clubs may have had better takeaways.

Hearing what students did and didn't like during the College Knowledge Program was intended to be a way to see what did and didn't help students from their perspective. However, taking the time now to reflect on the program and what is truly important for this program and programs like it I don't feel as strongly about this question. While it was important to make sense of activities that should be incorporated in the future, as discussed above, I believe that to help

students long term the College Knowledge Program should have emphasized material we felt was most important more than presenting in a way we felt would be more fun. Being a facilitator means making choices that will benefit the students the most and by avoiding stepping up and doing what we believe is needed was a missed opportunity. Today, I would not say that learning what students did and didn't like is significant for the College Knowledge Program, however, was nice to hear as a program curriculum designer.

***How Students Feel after Sessions***

Analyzing what activities students did and did not like is a separate section from how students felt after sessions, which I explore here. Establishing what activities students did and did not like being implemented into College Knowledge helps to make sense of what should continue to be in the program and possible changes and reasons for those changes. This section focuses on how students feel after sessions, which is different from making sense of specific activities. To learn what they felt after sessions we asked questions after each session.

Examples of questions asked:

- How do you feel our first session went?
- After the session, do you feel you gained more knowledge, understanding, comfortability, etc?
- If so, what did you take away? What was your biggest takeaway from today?

**“How did you feel after today’s session?”**

January 25th, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Felt it was great”</li> <li>● “It was good”</li> <li>● “It was good but I couldn’t hear a lot it was very quiet”</li> <li>● “good”</li> </ul>
February 1st, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Made more comfortable now I know them”</li> <li>● “Made more comfortable because it’s gonna help me apply</li> </ul>

	<p>to colleges etc.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “It makes me more knowledgeable to know what it is but not comfortable to apply for college”</li> <li>● “It makes me more comfortable about applying to college because now I know the terms”</li> <li>● “More comfortable because I won’t look stupid”</li> </ul>
February 8th, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Yes I feel like I know more and I’m more comfortable with the idea of college”</li> <li>● “I didn’t know college would give ‘gifts’ like grant other than scholarships”</li> </ul>
February 15th, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “It gave me an idea of who to reach out to for help”</li> </ul>
March 1st, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “It was good but I think it should be more speaking about what is coming for next year to prepare for it”</li> </ul>
March 15th, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Relaxed knowing how things go in order”</li> </ul>

Table 4: This table includes the dates of sessions and various students' responses after sessions when asked how they felt.

While students did express how they felt and some did explain why they felt the way they did, overall, there was not enough elaboration to make sense of this data. The biggest takeaway from these responses was that they left sessions feeling more “comfortable” and “relaxed”. This shows that they left learning something new or feeling better around a certain topic. Reading students' responses that they feel positively about sessions was reassuring as it was challenging to gauge if this was true from how they were during sessions.

*Significance*

Learning how students felt after sessions was reaffirming for me as a facilitator and mentor in hearing that left feeling better about higher education. The data that was collected above indicates that students left session’s better than when they entered regarding the college process. This connects to college knowledge as the goal of helping students feel more prepared

prior to entering higher education was met, but that the program has lots of room to grow through the mentors, curriculum, and facilitation of sessions.

***What Students Expressed They Learned from College Knowledge at the End of the Program***

During our last session, March 22<sup>nd</sup>, we made a point of giving students one last survey that asked for them to think about the whole College Knowledge program and reflect on their experience. In Table 3, I provide two of the nine questions asked on the last survey we asked students to respond to. These two questions were meant for students to express what they learned from being a part of the College Knowledge Program. The other seven questions on this survey have not been included in this table as they had less direct answers or were very similar to the answers to the two questions presented below.

<b>Your Biggest Takeaway from being in this program?</b>	<b>An area you learned a lot about?</b>
(Student 8) I learned a lot about what each vocabulary means in college and terms	(Student 8) I would say resume is something that I learned a lot about
(Student 3) How to apply for college	(Student 3) College program
(Student 2) To start preparing as soon as you can instead of waiting too long	(Student 2) FAFSA application
	(Student 4) Applying to college

Table 5: This table shows what students said in response to the prompts: Your Biggest Takeaway from being in this program? An area you learned a lot about? These questions were a part of a larger survey.

What I noticed from the table above is that students' responses were short with only two students responding in full and more explained sentences. The responses focus on applying to college, financial aid, and vocabulary. This once again validated the curriculum we had in the

College Knowledge Program reflected their original statements on what they hoped to learn and what they at the end felt they had learned. The two topics that align to the prior section on what they wanted to learn about were the application process and financial aid, which both were mentioned in their responses (as seen in the table above).

While their answers are not the most elaborate, what I take from these responses is that they left knowing about at least one new area regarding the college process that they didn't know before. In terms of the types of responses we received, what I make of this is that if I were to do this program again, I would spend more dedicated time towards crafting prompts for students to respond to. While they expressed, they learned something from the College Knowledge Program, the extent to how much I am unsure of. This may be because the prompts that they were asked aren't quite what they should be. Another reason could be the norms and culture we did (or didn't) establish for the program that influenced how they responded; this will be discussed more in depth later.

### *Significance*

Incorporating questions into the last session to hear what students learned overall from the College Knowledge Program allowed for a starting point to reflect on the program and what could be done differently. The original goal of the program was to work with seniors to prepare for the transition to high education, however, as this thesis discusses, having both juniors and seniors changed the material the program would address. What the data above suggest is that what students are taking away is how to apply and the various parts that go into applying to college. While it is important that students left knowing these topics that we discussed, the original learning goals for students was not what they left with due to being in a different place than seniors.

## **Personal Reflections: Aspirations, Struggles, Disappointments, Fears, and What I Would Do Differently**

In this section I take time to deeply reflect on my experience with the College Knowledge Program and the research process. I have broken this section into my aspirations, struggles, disappointments, the various feelings of fear I experienced, and what I would do differently. Each of these subsections I have written for myself to make sense of the entire thesis process and unpack this experience.

### ***Aspirations***

This subsection discusses the aspirations I had for the College Knowledge Program in terms of the curriculum Olivia, and I developed and for the students participating. Including the hopes, I had for this program prior to actually starting in January I believe is important in understanding how I feel now looking at the program now that it has ended.

### ***Aspirations with Respect to the Curriculum***

During the development of the curriculum for College Knowledge each session had a specific goal that we hoped would benefit students. My aspiration was that the curriculum would engage students in conversations by inspiring them to think deeper and ask questions. Each topic focused on a different subject; College 101, financial aid, academic advising and resources, engagement and clubs, and college applications. Along with having different learning unit topics, I had hoped that by implementing various types of lessons, activities, guests, and room for comments in person and through their writing that they would become engaged with the curriculum.

Each session involved an opening reflection which was implanted with the intent of having students start thinking about the topic for that day's session. The vision was that students who begin to think about the topic and develop questions or draw on previous knowledge to add to our discussion.

After this opening activity, we moved on to introducing the lesson and or activity; for example, explaining the fly swatter game or starting the presentation breaking down financial aid terms. During lessons and or activities I hoped students would use the opening part of sessions and continue to develop questions to ask throughout the presentation or activity.

After each part of the session was completed, we offered time for students to ask questions and add comments to the discussion. Knowing not every student would share in person we made it a point to always end with a writing survey/reflection. By providing students with many opportunities to share and engage with the material (asking questions, answering surveys, and interacting with lessons and or speakers during sessions) the hope was that students would interact with the material, activities, and us as mentors.

### *Aspirations for Students*

As mentioned prior, this program came about as a result of the need and interest Olivia and I had to focus on the transition from high school into higher education. In the past the program centered on the steps and process of applying, however, this program was meant to be different and thus serve a different group of students. I saw this program as being applicable to seniors who had already applied to college and were wanting to take the next step to prepare for this transition period. This aspiration I had for the students that would be joining us differed from what happened.

### *The Many Struggles I Faced*

The subsection below goes into the struggles I feel I faced during the College Knowledge Program duration. These struggles include the students we worked with in this program, their engagement, and balancing my assumptions and expectations.

### *Students*

The week leading up to our first College Knowledge session Olivia and I became aware that there would be both juniors and seniors participating. This created a disconnect between the material we had developed and the needs the students had. For example, one student continued to emphasize that the process of applying to colleges was their biggest concern and was what they hoped to learn more about. The communication breakdown that occurred I feel was a result of the timing of recruitment. When Olivia and I realized we wanted to create College Knowledge we were quickly approaching the end of the fall semester. Having little turnaround time and winter break meant that communication was difficult, and I believe led to confusion around the grades of students we were hoping to join us.

Having both juniors and seniors created a growing struggle for me in terms of knowing what curriculum was still or no longer applicable to students who were at different stages regarding the college process. To try and address all needs we continued with our planned sessions such as College 101, financial aid, academic advising and resources, and clubs and engagement. However, we decided to take out the sessions planned around wellness and added a day solely focusing on the college application process.

### *Students' engagement with curriculum and within the program*

I struggled to make sense of students' engagement with the curriculum and as participants in College Knowledge. Their responses and feedback throughout the program expressed that they enjoyed or liked activities, however, there was a lack of any constructive or elaborated

responses. This frustrated me as their behavior during sessions did not match the feelings about the program they wrote (liking activities, feeling it was engaging, and enjoying sessions). While planning sessions I had the goal of trying to provide valuable information that students would benefit from learning but also wanted them to enjoy it. Each survey that was presented to students dealt with questions centering around their feelings and thoughts towards the session that took place and or activities.

During sessions I would observe and write field notes to make sense of later as well as have a way to look back at sessions better. While writing my field notes I specifically would include moments I was expecting students to express disinterest in either an entire or specific part of a session. These observations came from students being on their phones, talking to one another, or not actively participating in discussions by not asking questions or sharing thoughts on the topic.

However, students' interactions and behaviors seemed at odds with their writings as their responses to sessions were different to what my assumption of how students would feel. They expressed that sessions were "interesting" and that they "enjoyed it." The dilemma between what I believed to be true and what students expressed brought up another expectation I brought into College Knowledge was that students would act in a way that aligned with how they felt. By this I mean that if a student was interested in a topic how that would be displayed is through active listening, body language, asking questions, etc.... I expected this to be how a student enjoying a session would be visually, but I did not expect to be struck by the differences between what I saw and what they wrote. This creates a challenge for me as I struggled to feel that I truly knew how students felt about sessions.

*Balancing my Assumptions and Expectations*

Thinking back to expectations I had about the incoming students prior to our first session, I reflected on past programs that Olivia and I have been a part of (CSI and CCCC). In previous programs, attendance had been a major barrier for us, adding to the importance I placed on students' enjoyment and fun in the College Knowledge Program. My assumption previously was that our attendance issues were rooted in their experience within the program; if they did not enjoy coming to each session then the result would be a low retention rate.

This assumption considerably influenced the expectation I had for students in College Knowledge as I believed that if students continued to come to sessions, then they must enjoy or gain a lot from participation. While the attendance for some sessions were better than others, we maintained communication with the majority of the students and had overall better retention and attendance than past programs. By having better attendance, I expected that that meant students would be more engaged both in person and when given surveys. This expectation draws back to the dilemma I had throughout College Knowledge and am still grappling with which is the difference between in person behavior and written responses. I believe this expectation I had resulted in the assumption that attendance and engagement were a bigger connection than they potentially are.

Another assumption I had was that the students joining us would be eager to participate in sessions and activities as they were voluntarily joining the College Knowledge Program. When imagining the students who would be participating in College Knowledge, what came to mind were students voluntarily choosing to join us every week wanting to leave the last session knowing more than the last and especially more than day one. As a past high school student myself I knew I joined outside of class activities because I believed they would benefit me now or in the future and would put as much into the program as I hoped to gain. While developing College Knowledge my own experiences and feelings towards outside of school programs

influenced the expectations and aspirations I had for students who would step forward and decide to join us as participants. Writing this now I am aware of how the expectation I had for students impacted how I viewed students and the program. Being conscious of the effects that expectations of others have on College Knowledge I believe is important for this thesis as well as myself and the future work I pursue.

### *Disappointments*

Reflecting on what my aspirations were and what happened made me address the disappointments I have about College Knowledge. In this section I reflect on those disappointments, or areas that I feel the College Knowledge fell short on. I will discuss later what I would do differently for this program, however, these disappointments touch on those shortcomings.

### *Norms and culture*

The first disappointment I came to realize was the norms and culture within the program. During our first session we introduced College Knowledge and spent time getting to know one another before starting our first session, however, we never built-in time to create group norms and the expectations of participating in this program. The lack of established norms I believe was detrimental and a grave error on our part as facilitators. In past programs the first session has always included dedicated time to defining norms, creating a list as a group, and expressing the mentors' expectations of students and for ourselves as facilitators. Norms are a regular part of “first day” activities both in school and most likely other outside of school programs. I feel that by not including this in College Knowledge we set a precedent that we were not a community but a program meant for them to just listen. Looking back on how I viewed students' engagement

and in session behavior I should be less surprised that how I envisioned them to be in the program was different because we had never made it clear what our expectation for them was.

### *Activities*

After reading through and making sense of students' feedback about activities it was clear that uniformly the fly swatter game was their favorite and most memorable activity. What stuck out about this activity was that it involved teams, had a physical element, and was presented as a competition. While I am pleased at how well this activity did in terms of students' responses, I regret not implementing more activities into College Knowledge. There was one other game, bingo, as discussed earlier, however, this is where activities stopped. Other sessions we had involved guests or PowerPoint presentations. Having guests such as academic advising and different clubs and groups on campus were included so that students had the opportunity to hear from an office on a college campus and other students' experiences being involved on campus. Again, students expressed that they liked having guests join us, however, they did not elaborate on this and their behaviors when speakers did come did not? match their written responses. Students would talk to one another, not ask questions, and would be on their phones. These were signs to me that they were not as engaged in speakers or other sessions using the fly swatter game as a comparison. My regret is that we continued formatting sessions the same way and not adding other activities like the fly swatter game that they did enjoy. I was very set on wanting to provide material to students to have them leave knowing more than when they started. I hoped that they would want to learn all this material and that would translate into their engagement during sessions. However, not implementing group work and activities is a disappointment I have that I believe impacted College Knowledge.

### *Comfort zones*

When reading and reflecting on the goals I had prior to starting College Knowledge I knew that at the end of the program I wanted to feel that both myself and students had grown from this experience. For students to have the ability to grow there must be elements that promote this. This is where I feel disappointed as I don't think that room for growth as a student, individual, and participant was included or encouraged. What I mean by this is that we did not make it a point to push students to share or elaborate in person during activities.

After the first session when Olivia and I went through the surveys, two students expressed that they did not like being called out. During the session the student was referring to Olivia and myself asked specific students to share what they have written. The intention of asking students to share is to make speaking out to the whole group more comfortable. This is also common practice in smaller college classes and gaining confidence in sharing your thoughts and feelings I believe is an important aspect of growing as a student, speaker, and for college.

Speaking and sharing to an entire class is something I struggled with a lot in middle and high school. The first time I was cold called in a college class I felt so nervous as I had never pushed myself out of my comfort zone in high school to share with my teachers and peers. While asking specific students to share may not seem like acutely pushing students out of their comfort zones, I feel that by not doing this they may enter college unprepared when they are potentially cold called as well. Once students expressed that they did not like being called out, Olivia and I never called out specific students again. In the moment I felt that we were respecting their boundaries and listening to what their needs were. However, I do not feel I made sense of those comments directly and instead glossed over the importance of these comments in how I led sessions as a mentor. By addressing these comments, I would have been able to see the larger picture and use resources around me to learn ways to encourage students to share.

### *Fear within my College Knowledge Experience*

Taking the time to reflect on College Knowledge and my role as a mentor, co-facilitator and curriculum designer, and researcher has illuminated a major theme for myself which is the various fears I had and brought into this work. In what follows, I try to make sense of where the fear was stemming from; the increased responsibility, the type of mentor I was and had hoped to be and stepping into a researcher role as a mentor for the College Knowledge Program.

#### *Increased Responsibility*

In past programs and semesters, I felt a sense of responsibility to bring my best self each session to provide students with a mentor who wanted to help them reach their goals and address their needs. While this at times was stressful, especially when finalizing their applications, I overall knew that I was doing all that I could to be a support for students.

After CSI was no longer running and we shifted to CCCC I felt a growing sense of weight on my shoulders as this was also the beginning stages of my thesis site. Once becoming the official site for my work my role, along with Olivia, was to design, recruit, and run sessions with the two of us being responsible for the program. As the program continued and we moved from Zoom to in person is when I first identified feeling uneasy. I felt an increasing amount of fear trying to balance research and the goals of CCCC for students. Each week fewer and fewer students would be at sessions making it clear a restart to the program was eminent. After taking the time to think about the work Olivia and I wanted to do in the spring of 2022 we arrived at College Knowledge. Coming to this decision meant we would have a stressful spring with planning, running sessions, conducting research, and writing our theses.

January is when I felt that fear became my main emotion connected to my thesis and work with College Knowledge. Each week I developed a stronger sense of fear; fear of not being good enough for the students, fear that our curriculum wasn't achieving what we had hoped, fear

that students wouldn't continue coming, fear that I would fail at research, and overall fear of how to manage running College Knowledge as a mentor while also being a first-time researcher. The fear that I had due to the increased responsibility impacted the mentor I was throughout this program that differed from the type of mentor I had originally hoped to be.

### *The Type of Mentor I Was and the Mentor I Want to Be*

The opportunity to have been a mentor for high school students for the past four years has taught me so much about myself and the type of youth worker I want to be. The confidence I have as a youth worker is directly correlated to my involvement with CSI and now College Knowledge. Compared to past programs, as mentioned above, I brought a lot more of my own fears as a mentor into College Knowledge than I have previously. In past programs I felt a sense of community between the mentors and I as there were more of us (five to now two) and our main reason for being a mentor was to gain experience with youth and serve as a resource to students. I went into College Knowledge with the hope that I would be that resource and support for students who led with confidence. While I am proud of the mentor I have become, I feel that the fear and stress that I brought into sessions impacted my effectiveness as a mentor. Compared to past sessions I think I became caught up and lost a sense of the "bigger picture" and wanting to meet my goals as a mentor as well as have students learn as much as possible while also trying to conduct research for this thesis.

### *Stepping into College Knowledge as a Researcher*

Once declaring as a Community, Youth, & Education Studies major in the spring of my first year at Clark, I knew that completing a thesis project would come soon enough. The spring of junior year is when we started the process of designing our research.

Research has always brought me a wave of anxiety as I didn't see myself as being able to do it. I never saw myself as a researcher capable of writing a thesis, making this a journey filled with many emotions. Having my site and work change several times only made me feel more fear about my ability to conduct research. I didn't know where to start as I had ideas of what I envisioned but felt limited in what I would be able to do. This fear I had of research became extremely prevalent when working within my site.

When my site was focused on CCCC in the fall of 2021 I struggled with balancing collecting data and focusing on how to better meet student's needs. Was I doing this because I needed a site for research or was I doing this work because I felt passionate about college readiness and helping students through this time of uncertainty?

As the semester went on and it became clearer a "revamp" was imminent for the spring I felt disappointed that I didn't address and work towards this fear of research more. Being aware of this, I made it a point to address this fear before College Knowledge began in January. To address this growing fear, I set clear goals and mission for what I wanted College Knowledge to be. I wanted to do work that I felt passionate about and saw a need for which I believed College Knowledge would be. However, as sessions continued each week, I felt the same fear of research creep up.

This fear I believe impacted the way I viewed students' responses to surveys and reflections. Students expressed gratitude and what they did and didn't like which helped us as program designers plan future sessions, however, I felt frustrated in the lack of data I perceived we were collecting. I was scared that there wasn't ever enough and that there was always more I failed to do in terms of collecting data. Making sense of this now, I feel I never actually fully addressed my fear of balancing research and youth work and wish I had dealt with this fear more throughout College Knowledge.

### ***What I Would Do Differently***

If I were to pass on what I learned from this experience to future mentors and for my future self, there are many areas I would address and suggestions for what I believe should be done differently; including and emphasizing group norms, additional group activities, and finding resources on how to be an effective mentor for high school students.

As mentioned previously, norms and an established culture for this program were not explicitly addressed. This created a lack of community between one another making it hard for us to grow as individuals and as a group. I believe this led to challenges with engagement and participation that I felt negatively impacted the program and students' ability to grow from being a part of College Knowledge. Asking myself why we didn't dedicate time to collectively creating norms is something I don't have the complete answer to; however, this was a major downfall for us and should not be missing from future programs. In retrospect, I would have incorporated a good amount of time during our first session of the College Knowledge Program to establish group norms, our expectations as mentors, their expectations of us, and discuss the community culture we wanted for our program (respecting one another, pushing ourselves to step out of comfort zones, active listening for one another and guests, etc.). By including these on day one we would have been able to remind students and ourselves what we discussed in the beginning to keep ourselves and one another accountable.

When developing a curriculum trying to balance students' enjoyment and learning was a challenge. The material we were presenting was important and I felt was necessary to provide to them. However, I feel we limited ourselves in how we presented material by relying on presentations and using a typical banking model to teach the curriculum. We did not make it a priority to implement different activities in each session. While specific sessions did include

different ways of presenting material (games, speakers, and panels) it was not a regular part of College Knowledge. Having more incorporated time for group activities may have helped address challenges we had such as engagement, stretching out of comfort zones, and a greater sense of community.

As a mentor for College Knowledge, I dealt with many emotions as touched on previously. I placed a lot of pressure on myself to be the best mentor I could be as well as develop a curriculum that would positively impact students. While I am proud of myself for the work I accomplished as a mentor, first time program co-designer and facilitator, and researcher I wish I spent time researching and using resources around me (Andrea Allen, peers, Olivia, etc.) to improve as a youth worker. Asking for help and advice is something I did not do, which was a large part of why I continued feeling intense fear throughout this process. Being a leader means using the resources around you and I don't feel I did that. Today, I wish I asked those around me for support instead of placing the responsibility only on myself and not helping myself work through these emotions.

### ***Final Thoughts: What Have I Learned from the Praxis Project (for Myself and Others)***

This process from planning, running, researching, data analysis, and reflecting has been one filled with many emotions. I've written about the fear I felt going into and throughout the duration of the College Knowledge Program, however, I have also touched on feeling overwhelmed, anxious, a lot of self-doubt, and sadness. I had high expectations and hopes for myself as a mentor, facilitator, and researcher and as the program went on, I felt increasingly that the program wasn't meeting the goals I had hoped to achieve. While I dreamt of a "perfect" program that students could walk away from having a plethora of learning experiences, making new connections, and developing more confidence and comfortability when envisioning

themselves in higher education, I don't know if students had the opportunity to take all of this away at the end. This, as I have discussed prior, may be due to the norms and culture of the program, the fear I brought in, the curriculum, and or the prompts we asked students on surveys. While there are many areas I would do differently if given the chance, I am leaving this experience proud of the work Olivia and I have done and the students who helped us also learn along the way.

Who I am today and the person I was four years ago on move in day freshman year connects to the same growth I have made during this thesis process. The praxis journey I had starting when I declared as a CYES major started the same way move in day felt. Once I officially declared as a CYES major the idea of praxis became increasingly clearer, leaving me feeling more and more unsure of my ability to do this work. Once praxis started and the challenges within my site emerged, I reverted back to how I previously dealt with this fear, which was by not addressing. However, unlike freshman year I didn't just do what was expected of me and pushed down my feelings. This time I gave myself the space to reflect on what happened and what I would do differently. Being open enough to discuss in my thesis the challenges and emotions I had was hard for me but pushed me out of a comfort zone I didn't know I had which was not addressing my feelings and trying to maintain what I perceived others wanted from me as an academic.

By pushing myself to deal with these feelings that were major part of my praxis experience, I am preparing myself as a future graduate student, school counselor, and youth worker. The experience I had directly connects to the College Knowledge Program and what I still believe is important about the program, which is preparing and equipping students for higher education by discussing different topics. Through this program and work I learned more about myself and what I need to face head on to succeed for this next step I am about to take. What I

have taken away from this praxis journey is what I hope students who join the College Knowledge Program takeaway as well as they prepare for higher education.

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