

COLLEGE ACCESS FOR NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS:

HOW TO REPLICATE A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM

By Polly Trout, Ph.D.

Seattle Education Access (SEA) provides higher education advocacy and opportunity to people struggling to overcome poverty and adversity. Founded in 2002, SEA has eight years of experience helping young adults from low-income and marginalized backgrounds make successful transitions to local community colleges. A typical student in our program is a young adult whose education has been disrupted by poverty, homelessness, and trauma. Our job is to help them get back on track with their education so they can move forward to meaningful work at a living wage. We not only help students enroll in college, but continue to provide advocacy and support throughout their college career. Our College Success Program offers scholarships integrated with social support: free academic advising, career counseling, mentoring, tutoring, and advocacy.

In 2009, we served 391 students. 83% of our students have experienced homelessness, 100% are low income, 72% are people of color, 37% are LGBTQ, 31% are single parents, and 25% are immigrants. Our retention rate is unequalled. 91% of our students are enrolled in school in good academic standing or have graduated. In 2009, 29% of our students completed a program of study. Our graduation rate would be even higher except for the fact that the number of students served has been growing substantially each year (with 65% growth between 2008 and 2009). Increasingly, other service providers are turning to our service model and asking, what would it take for our college access program to replicate this level of measurable results? In this article, I want to share the seven reasons why our college success program works so well:

- We are values-based.
- We are student-centered.
- We are culturally competent.
- We provide expert advice.
- We provide community support.
- We provide financial support.
- We have excellent staff hiring, training, and supervision practices in place.

Let us look at each of these pillars of success in greater detail.

We are values-based.

At SEA, our mission, vision, and values are clearly stated and actively promoted at every level and opportunity.

We believe:

- in the inherent worth and dignity of each human being
- that education is a life-long process of self-discovery and world discovery
- that education is its own reward and enriches life
- that every person deserves a good education
- that every person is responsible for his or her own life
- that every person has unique gifts and that when those gifts are nourished and given a chance to flourish, both the individual and the community benefit
- that by helping others, and by accepting help from others, we add meaning and beauty to life

We welcome:

- gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community members, and celebrate their right to self-determination
- people from all ethnic, cultural and national backgrounds
- people from all religious faiths and philosophical worldviews who share our values and promote our mission

We are committed:

- to using our financial resources in the most efficient and responsible way possible to further our mission.
- to measuring the success of our organization by the success and well-being of our students.

All members of our community – staff, board, volunteers, donors, and students – are expected to put our shared values into daily practice so that every aspect of our organization demonstrates and models ethical best practices. Our core values are respect, compassion, and equality. We respect our students by treating them like human beings and capable adults. We show compassion for our students by understanding how trauma and poverty create social and psychological barriers to college success. We create a culture of equality by treating our students as equals and neighbors.

Education is a lifelong process of personal transformation as we daily struggle to better understand ourselves, others, and our world. Education is more than mere credentialing or professional development; it is a way for us to live more fully by developing our innate human ability to think both analytically and creatively in order to solve problems. Although different people have different learning styles and different gifts, all people are capable of learning,

growing, thinking, and contributing. A good education program must have staff and volunteers who are passionate about their own continuing education, so they can model that enthusiasm for the students.

It can not possibly be overstated what a profound impact a values-driven organizational culture has on the quality of SEA's work. When students are asked to evaluate our program, over and over they say, "What makes SEA so special is they treat me like a human being." Most of our students have had shaming and disempowering experiences with public K-12 schools. Although college can be and will be different for them once they make a successful transition to the new culture, many students enter our program only having experienced school as an alienating and humiliating social institution. The most important thing we can do is make them feel like intelligent and respected human beings, so that we are able to build rapport and act as tour guides to college culture.

We are student-centered.

We believe that each individual must take responsibility for his or her own life. Our job is to provide students with the resources they need to thrive, while empowering them to take charge of their own lives and set their own goals. Many social service programs for marginalized and homeless young adults make the mistake of infantilizing clients, unconsciously promoting a prolonged state of adolescent helplessness. The transition from adolescence to young adulthood is challenging for everyone in American culture, even middle class youth with supportive families. Marginalized youth who lack functioning family of origin are in even more need of healthy psychological support as they navigate this transition.

Our program is individualized, flexible, and tailored to each student's specific and unique needs. I originally founded SEA as a college access program for homeless youth and young adults, and we still have a committed outreach to this population. As our program has grown, we have added outreach efforts to other underserved populations, such as people who have been incarcerated, single parents, people living in low income housing, and immigrants, with a special commitment to undocumented immigrants. (One of the few marginalized youth populations we do not regularly serve are foster youth, but this is only because there are other well funded and high quality college access programs in King County that specifically serve foster youth. We collaborate with these programs rather than duplicating their resources.) Each of our students has a unique set of gifts and barriers, and we are most effective when we work with each student one on one to help them craft an education plan that is specifically tailored to their dreams and needs.

Some other programs have a set, mandatory curriculum for all students. For some students this is useful, but others experience highly structured group programming as alienating and unproductive. Some learners need a high level of structure; others thrive in a low structure environment. Many of our students are exhausted and harried, and making them "jump through

hoops” to get support is experienced as demeaning and wasteful. At all times, our focus is on what is best for the student, and on quality rather than quantity.

When a new student meets with a staff person for the first time, we start by having a conversation with the student about their dreams, gifts, skills, goals, and barriers. Where do they want to be in ten years? What are their values? What do they enjoy? We help them create an education plan that is based on their own goals and outline the concrete action steps in that plan, of how to get from where they are today to where they want to be in the future. For some students, this may mean getting a one or two year vocational certificate. For other students, it may include using local community colleges as a springboard to go on to four year universities and graduate school.

Most traditional college access programs focus on helping youth who are successful in high school go directly to a four year college after graduation. This is important work, but not sufficient in itself, given the shocking number of youth who are being failed by the public school system. Most of the students we serve have a GED rather than a high school diploma, and even those who have a diploma typically did not complete a college track curriculum. However, there is rarely any direct correlation between a low income student’s high school transcript and their college capability. More often, failure to complete high school says more about the quality of the school and the level of social and emotional support available in the family and community than it says about the student’s innate ability. We have seen many high school drop outs go on to have successful college careers once they were provided with adequate financial and social support and empowered by a vision of their own education plan that is self-directed.

Our student-centered model has directly impacted our program’s quality and format. From the beginning, SEA’s program has been developed in partnership with the students we serve. We have ongoing conversations with them about what works and what doesn’t, what they need, and what strategies make them feel supported and empowered. Students are given annual opportunities to evaluate our program and staff, and we take student feedback very seriously. By listening deeply to our students we have an ongoing opportunity to hone the quality of our program. The staff responds directly to the needs of the individual students and continues to learn new skills as our demographic shifts and grows. For example, over the years we have realized that undocumented immigrants are acutely underserved in college access, so the staff has made a commitment to learning about their lives and the political and sociological issues that impact them, as well as becoming knowledgeable about immigration law and college access strategies and advocacy that maximize education access for these students.

We are culturally competent.

The students we serve are tremendously diverse, and it is critical that each one feels welcomed and affirmed by our community. *“Cultural competence” is the ability to appreciate different cultures mixed with an enthusiasm for learning about other cultures.* The culturally

competent person is not judgmental, and does not believe that some cultures are better than others. Because SEA is a grassroots learning community, we have a shared passion for life-long learning, which is an essential ingredient in cultural competency. It is not possible to be knowledgeable about every culture, but it is possible to approach each new culture with curiosity, humility, an open mind, and an open heart.

Cultural competency also requires adequate education about how sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism create interlocking barriers to individual success. Staff and volunteers should be thoroughly educated about these issues and have ongoing opportunities to discuss these issues with students and each other, so that the community can vigorously advocate for the rights of the students. Staff diversity is also critical, because it allows the staff to learn from each other and model engaged dialogue for the students.

It is possible, even necessary, to have a profound respect for diverse cultures but still bring a critical analysis to specific themes in the cultures that you are studying. Real respect is tempered with honesty. For example, there are many things about homeless youth culture that I admire and appreciate. I am inspired by the way homeless youth idealize loyalty, chosen family, and community. I appreciate their revolutionary energy, their rugged individualism, their brutal honesty, and their “do it yourself” ethic of making art out of found objects. In my opinion, the world would be a better place if more Americans stood by their friends in crises, dumpster dived, and mended their own clothes. That being said, there are also themes in this subculture that sadden me: domestic violence, chemical addiction, despair, alienation. I do not have to pretend to my homeless students that I do not have opinions about these things. As a learning community, we can instead explore all of these themes with kindness and integrity, examining the subculture using tools that we find in anthropology, history, sociology, psychology, literature, and art. In the process, both my students and myself are enriched.

Authentic cultural criticism, however, must cut both ways. Working with homeless youth has also taught me to view my own background of white, middle class American privilege with a far deeper level of critical analysis than I previously possessed. All cultures, like all individuals, are a mixture of greatness, inspiration, and muddled mistakes. We can discuss this and learn from each other, but only if the dialogue takes place with a baseline of mutual respect and curiosity.

We provide expert advice.

Low income students have not typically received adequate academic advising in the schools they have attended in the past. Our staff helps each student create an education plan, and research which school and program is the best fit, how to get financial aid and other resources. We teach them how to successfully navigate the college bureaucracy. We also provide tutoring, since many of our students have experienced a disruption in their educations due to poverty or

trauma and need help getting back on track. On a typical day, our staff is likely to help with these projects:

- How to fill out the FAFSA
- How to get a dependency status override
- How to research and apply for external scholarships
- Which college to attend
- How to write an application essay
- Which classes to register for to complete a degree
- What to do when the financial aid office has lost your file
- How to access campus resources
- How to mediate a conflict between an instructor and student

SEA has a holistic approach to college success that looks at the big picture of the student's life, and helps the student find all the resources he or she will need in order to thrive academically. We connect our students to other community resources, such as food banks, feeding programs, childcare, low income housing, low income health care, dental care, counseling, chemical dependency counseling, and employment counseling. We are a resource center for any problem that threatens to derail academic success. Of course, we can't solve every problem, but we do our best to find the resources our students need, and also to offer them community support as they learn how to solve their own problems and navigate the complex web of social services.

Due to the diversity of the students we serve, we cannot be experts in all the problems that face them, so we partner with many other nonprofits in the community for legal advice, immigration advice, case management, low income housing, counseling services, and other resources. In return, our staff provides free college access advice to other service providers who are working with low income and marginalized youth and need expert guidance in our area of specialization.

Our staff is careful to teach our students skills, rather than perform tasks for them. For example, we walk them through the FAFSA and explain how to do it, so that next year they will be able to do it for themselves. When we accompany a student to the financial aid office to provide advocacy, we dialogue with the student about how to be a strong, assertive self-advocate and model what that looks like. The focus is always on creating self-sufficiency and empowerment in a supportive and respectful cultural environment.

We provide community support.

Low income and marginalized students may not have adequate social support from their families of origin. In order to succeed, they need to know that people believe in them and are cheering them on towards graduation. We emphasize community building and peer support at SEA so that students have opportunities to build supportive relationships with staff, volunteers, and peers.

“The scholarship was great,” students tell us, “but the way you believed in me was even more important.” Our small office has drop in hours from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday, and many students stop by to say hello, check their email, pick up mail, do homework, receive tutoring, or just have a warm and friendly place to have a snack or wait for the bus.

Our students form supportive peer relationships with each other, and we introduce students with similar backgrounds or life experiences to each other to help them form campus networks. We encourage students and former students to volunteer with us, serve on our board of directors, and apply for staff positions. We treat our students as equals and neighbors who are partnering with the staff to work for social justice and positive change.

Our method for offering community support is low pressure and respects individual privacy. Some students are very private, and do not choose to become a part of the community. Other students start out by not trusting us, but slowly over time come to see that we really do care for them and can offer them a safe and caring place.

We provide financial support.

Let’s not lose sight of the fact that although respectful and compassionate service is the foundation of our success, our low income students also need material resources to succeed in college. We help our students apply for financial aid, scholarships, government benefits (like food stamps), and community resources offered by other nonprofits (like low income housing). We also help our students make a budget. When the student is working hard to make the best use of all available resources and has a frugal budget, but is still falling short of what they need to excel academically, then we offer “gap” scholarships (the difference between their income and expenses in their budget). Our staff can use our scholarship fund to pay for the small initial start-up fees that are so important to successful enrollment, especially application fees and assessment test score fees. Finally, we are able to use our scholarship fund for small emergencies that threaten to derail student success (for example, a deposit for a new apartment for a student who unexpectedly loses housing mid-quarter). Our scholarship fund allows our staff to provide a safety net for our students so that their time and energy can remain focused on academic achievement rather than material survival.

At SEA, scholarship requests that are under \$250 per quarter can be handled by the staff in a direct and efficient manner. Routine small expenses, like tests and application fees, can be

approved by direct service staff on the spot. Other small expenses, such as textbooks or bus passes, need to be approved by the Executive Director, but there is generally a 24 hour turnaround time between the request and the disbursement. Timely response to financial requests are critical, from a psychological perspective, to keeping our students on track academically. Financial stress derails academic success by sapping time and energy that needs to be focused on school.

Scholarship requests above \$250 are handled by our Scholarship Review Committee, a committee of volunteers that accepts formal applications, interviews students, and makes final decisions about scholarship disbursement. Having an external committee mediate scholarship requests allows direct service staff to focus on advocacy and relationship building with individual students, while maintaining an objective strategy for scholarship awards.

How to Hire, Train, and Support Excellent Staff: Some Recommendations

Perhaps the single most important decision to be made in creating an excellent college access program is hiring the right staff. Whenever possible, staff should come from the communities served. At SEA, we have had good success hiring our own students through work study positions. Screen applicants carefully to make sure they share your program's vision and values. All staff should be personally passionate about education as a life-long opportunity. For this reason, recent college graduates who chose a major based on intellectual enthusiasm rather than career credentialing can also make excellent staff. It is easier to teach a history major how to provide college access than it is to teach a social work major how to treat people like human beings, if they haven't already figured that out on their own. Similarly, it is easier to hire someone who is already culturally competent than it is to train someone who is deeply mired in unexamined white privilege. Look for applicants who genuinely love to learn for its own sake, who genuinely respect and admire diversity, and who can create authentic rapport with your students.

Staff training and supervision are also crucial. SEA is still quite small, so our training program is informal. We make sure that new staff are given plenty of opportunity during their first few months to job shadow senior staff. Next, the junior staff person has adequate opportunity to provide direct service with a senior staff member present for consultation. Once the new staff person feels comfortable with their job requirements and role, they can work independently, checking in with senior staff as questions arise. New staff need to be able to debrief about their direct service experiences, and to be encouraged to develop their own helping style that plays to their natural strengths. Training should be ongoing for all staff members engaged in direct service, so that the whole staff has regular opportunities to discuss racism, classism, ethics, and values, as well as learning technical skills.

Direct service work with oppressed and marginalized people is joyful and rewarding, but it is also exhausting. Supervisors need to carefully protect their staff from burnout, watching for signs (such as emotional numbness, despair, irritability) and keeping the workload at a healthy and manageable level. At SEA, each staff member who does direct service full time also has some administrative responsibilities, so that the number of students served each day is not emotionally overwhelming and the quality of service remains high.

Conclusion:

When I founded SEA in 2002, I was a college instructor taking a leave of absence from academia to stay home with my new baby. I started volunteering at a local youth center, helping homeless youth get their GEDs. I was amazed by my students. They were smart, funny, gifted, articulate, idealistic. Since I had recently been teaching at a state university, I knew without a doubt that they were college capable. There was nothing wrong with their brains – there was something wrong with the society that had written them off as human garbage. They were failing educationally because they had inadequate financial, social, and emotional support. In failing to complete their educations, they were permanently trapped in poverty. When I started talking to homeless youth case managers about my vision for sending these youth to college, I was met with blank stares. They said, “that’s impossible – you would be setting them up to fail.” I was enraged by the system’s lack of faith in these youth.

Now, eight years later, college access programs for low income and marginalized youth are nationally coming into focus. There is more awareness that education is our greatest weapon against poverty and despair. Services like the ones that we offer at SEA are desperately needed all over the country. SEA’s program is cost efficient; on average, it takes less than \$1,000 per student to help a formerly homeless youth and high school drop-out successfully transition to college. A college degree will significantly alter that person’s entire life trajectory, and the life trajectories of his or her children. Seen only from a financial perspective, the benefit to society is enormous. An unemployable homeless youth will remain at high risk for poverty, incarceration, substance abuse, crime, and welfare. Once educated, that same person becomes a contributing member of society.

We need high quality college access programs all over the country for nontraditional, returning students from low income and marginalized backgrounds. I hope that our program model will help your community to develop similar strategies making college a real possibility for even the most oppressed members of our society.

Polly Trout, Ph.D., is the founder and Director of Advocacy and Outreach for Seattle Education Access (SEA), a nonprofit that provides higher education advocacy and opportunity to people struggling to overcome poverty and adversity. Dr. Trout has a B.A. from The Evergreen State College, an M.T.S. from Harvard Divinity School, and a Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Boston University. She lectured in Religious Studies for three years at San Diego State University before founding SEA in 2002, and is the author of Eastern Seeds, Western Soil: Three Gurus in America.