

KNOWLEDGE BRIEF

Postsecondary Engagement for Successfully Transitioning Students to College

What is postsecondary engagement and why is it important?

Postsecondary engagement comprises the opportunities and activities that middle and high school students experience to build awareness and develop college-going knowledge and skills for successful transition to college. Connecting students to postsecondary engagement activities is a proactive approach to exposing students to the culture and norms of college and to showing how college functions differently from high school.¹ This includes engaging in activities such as applying to college, securing financial aid, and learning about programs and services available on college campuses, which help to familiarize students with postsecondary culture and programming, thus, helping to ease the transition to college.² Students also benefit from activities to learn where to go on campus for student services such as the mental health clinic, housing resources, or the food pantry.

How can postsecondary engagement address equity gaps in college enrollment and foster sense of belonging?

For students who have been historically marginalized including students of color, first-generation college-going students, multi-lingual learners, students in foster care, students with disabilities, and justice-involved students, intentional outreach and engagement helps to address equity gaps in postsecondary education enrollment and builds social capital. Whether receiving key information about how to navigate college and its myriad processes, or meeting current college students with whom they relate, opportunities for such postsecondary engagement can be pivotal to students who are new to college culture and practices. Underrepresented students may experience thoughts and feelings of inadequacy related to systems of oppression in education and society; thus, knowing other students on campus with similar demographics can make a difference in their self-image and sense of belonging. Once students matriculate, proactive and regular college advising for all students, and especially, for underrepresented students, increases postsecondary retention.³

Additionally, in today's post-pandemic times, where students have endured increasing challenges of isolation and disengagement, it's important to inform prospective students about on-campus affiliation groups where they can connect with peers and find community. Organizing a student panel can show

¹ Conley, 2007

² Boroach and Hope, 2009

³ Tippetts et al., 2022; Torres and Hernandez, 2009

prospective students that colleges offer social engagement through peer communities based on shared racial, ethnic, or gender identities such as the Black Student Union, Latinx student organizations, or LGBTQ+ groups, as well as peer communities through interest-based clubs or career technical education (CTE)⁴ pathways. Such postsecondary engagement activities are examples of universal design for learning — an approach that is intended to anticipate and reduce barriers to learning of targeted student groups, while also benefiting most, if not all students.

What key knowledge and skills do students need to successfully transition to college?

Research and practice have highlighted the following “ingredients” or knowledge and skills that all students need to know for successful transition to college.

Key Knowledge Needed for Successful Transition to College

- *Understanding one’s interests
- *Understanding career options
- Knowing the offerings at prospective colleges
- Knowing the courses needed to enter a major of interest
- Knowing how to enroll in classes
- Understanding the college application process
- Discussing financial planning (with family) and knowing how to apply for financial aid
- Knowing where to go for academic support
- *Being familiar with student services
- *Knowing where to find like-minded peers and mentors
- *Learning where career services, work-based learning opportunities, and employment services can be found

**Information traditionally missing from postsecondary engagement activities.*

Key Skills that Students Need to Practice for Postsecondary Success

- Being academically prepared to handle college-level work (including completing CTE/CE prerequisites, as appropriate)
- Having the social-emotional skills and attitudes needed to succeed in an unstructured college environment
- Understanding how to study in college, work with peers, and engage with a professor
- Managing time

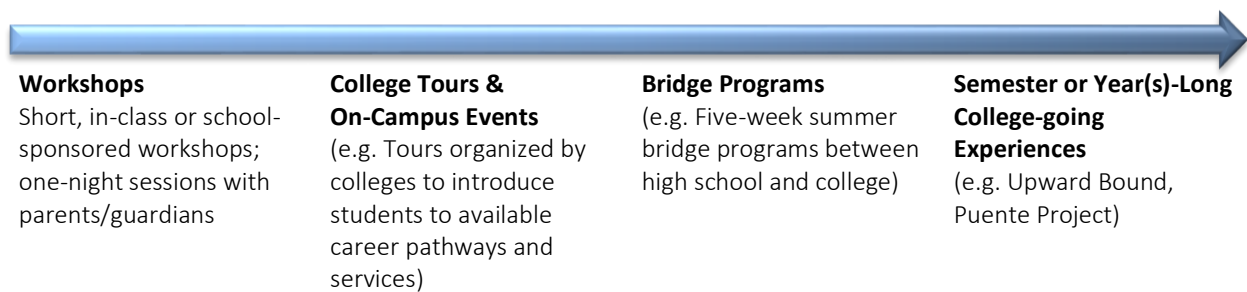
⁴ For clarification, K–12 uses the term *career technical education*, or CTE, while postsecondary education uses the term *career education*, or CE.

What types of postsecondary engagement strategies help build key knowledge and skills for students?

Students can acquire key knowledge and skills for transitioning to college in numerous ways — ideally, through active engagement and on college campuses where students can begin to form connections to a postsecondary environment. All postsecondary engagement strategies promote a college-going mindset and readiness for successful transition to college. Postsecondary engagement strategies also span a continuum of involvement intensity, ranging from parent nights held at the high school to college tours to more in-depth college-going experiences that bring students onto a college campus for multiple weeks, months, or semesters. In-depth, college-going experiences include college-sponsored outreach programs, bridge programs, interest-focused camps or internships that add a career focus to traditional bridge programs, as well as year-long and multi-year-long programs. Other strategies that enable students to experience college-level work directly are articulated CTE courses and dual enrollment classes. But while these courses may clarify college academic expectations, they may still need to be complemented with broader experiences to ensure that students can navigate a college campus.

Not every level of intensity is needed for every student; high school administrators, program directors, and pathway leads can determine the best fit for their various student populations. The aim is to approach postsecondary engagement intentionally and consider each student’s situation. For students in career pathways, for example, the experiences can be “hard-wired” into their pathway programming. Students who are underrepresented in postsecondary education can benefit from additional support provided through strategies of greater intensity. A continuum of postsecondary engagement strategies, shown below in Figure 1, displays the scale of involvement intensity. (See Appendix A for a more detailed continuum of postsecondary engagement activities.)

Figure 1. Postsecondary Engagement Strategy Types Continuum



The strategy types spanning the continuum can be viewed as the “how” to deliver key content needed for successful transition to college (see lists on page 2). Key skills, which require practice over time, can be integrated into high school courses, bridge programs, and in-depth college-going experiences. Following are brief descriptions of strategy types along with advantages and disadvantages of each type.

Short Workshops. Workshops can be offered to students in class or during special in-school sessions. Engagement with parents and guardians can happen through evening workshops offered in multiple languages and with time for families to ask questions and receive follow-up support with specific steps.

- *Advantages:* Relatively easy to implement and very useful if enough time is offered for assistance with applications and financial aid.
- *Disadvantages:* May gloss over critical processes that can sometimes stymie families when it comes time to apply to college; do not provide opportunities for students to develop skills that have been shown to be important for college success, such as academic and social-emotional preparation.

College Tours and On-Campus Events. College tours and on-campus events are best organized in partnership between schools and local colleges to ideally connect students to career areas or majors of interest, and to introduce students to college services and peer communities. College tours and on-campus events can be planned with support of college and regional resources. Tours and events can include families and be used as strategies to complement other in-school workshops or experiences.

- *Advantages:* Provides first-hand experience with colleges; enables conversations with faculty, staff, and students, often in areas of career interest; offers inspiration and motivation, and can support application and financial aid processes, if time permits.
- *Disadvantages:* Requires some planning (see Helpful Resources near the end of this brief to access how-to [guides](#) for planning community college tours and other related events). Campus tours, alone, without follow-up is not as effective as a tour with application and financial aid assistance, when appropriate.

Bridge Programs. Bridge programs are short-term — often two to five week-long, summer programs — offered through school-college partnerships and by local community organizations. Bridge programs offer academic preparation, social enrichment, and a peer network such as the [MiraCosta College Summer Bridge](#) or [EOP BEST \(Building Essential Skills and Talents\) Summer Bridge](#) at San Diego State University. These two examples of bridge programs also offer UC/CSU transfer level credit.

- *Advantages:* Offers the “whole package” of services, including addressing academic and social-emotional aspects of transition, and connects students with peers.
- *Disadvantages:* Requires planning and dedicated programming, often in partnership with other organizations that may have their own constraints or limits to enrollment.

Semester and Year-Long+ Experiences. These multi-semester or multi-year college-going experiences can be programs available to middle and high school students on their campuses or at an off-site center. Some programs are designed to provide academic skills support to adjust to college-level work and to introduce students to the campus, faculty, and resources. Some offer credit-bearing courses in math, reading, or writing. Federally-funded [Upward Bound](#), California state-funded, [Puente Project](#), and organization-based [College Track](#), for example, are types of college transition programs that provide students with programming and support such as academic instruction, cultural enrichment, and education counseling for multiple years between 7th and 12th grades, and sometimes through college. One program that starts between high school graduation and matriculation, while continuing through college is the [CRUISE](#) (Creating Rich Unique Intellectual Student Experiences) program at San Diego Mesa

College. CRUISE focuses on closing the equity gap, particularly with Latinx students, building community and student confidence.

- *Advantages:* Allows for building of community and mutual support over time in addition to addressing college “mindsets” and academic preparation, career and college exploration, and the logistics of applying and enrolling in college; builds social capital, especially for first-generation students.
- *Disadvantages:* Requires dedicated resources and/or possibly, inclusion in master schedule at the high school; due to enrollment requirements or limits, may not be available to all students who could benefit.

What are some guiding principles and proven practices for educators, counselors, and staff who plan postsecondary engagement for students?

While there is no template for planning and implementing postsecondary engagement opportunities, following are guiding principles and examples culled from research⁵ and interviews with practitioners in the San Diego-Imperial region.

- **Remove barriers for students to participate.**
 - *Example:* Actively recruit middle and/or high school students rather than wait for them to show up. Eliminate requirements to participate such as an application or a G.P.A. threshold.
- **Design comprehensive programs, involving experiential activities, that address multiple barriers to successful transition to college.**
 - *Example:* On college tours, visit both academic and career education programs; tour student services including the tutoring center, financial aid office, food pantry, disabled student programs and services (DSPS), and housing resources; and point out other campus locations such as student parking, café, and studying and gathering spots.
 - *Example:* While on campus, arrange for students to meet and talk to faculty who teach in an area of interest or career education pathway. Build time in the schedule to guide students through the college application process.
- **Facilitate peer group environments that encourage the development of socially and emotionally supportive networks to build students’ social capital.**
 - *Example:* Design a cohort-based college transition program or group-oriented postsecondary engagement activities.
 - *Example:* Create opportunities for high school students to interact with college students through student panels, interviews, or shadowing; some San Diego-Imperial colleges offer peer navigators — second- and third-year college students who provide outreach and transition support to first-year students.

⁵ Principles are informed by Perna and Cooper, 2005; Gándara, 2001.

- **Establish or strengthen partnerships to leverage resources** necessary to implement a comprehensive program with broad reach.
 - *Example:* To help students think about their interests and college major, partner with local businesses and agencies related to a school’s CTE pathways or courses. Arrange to tour the work site and learn about different careers within the industry, invite professionals to speak about their career journey and postsecondary experiences, and coordinate internships.
 - *Example:* Offer articulated CTE courses and dual enrollment courses, possibly as part of a career pathway, so students can earn early college credits.

- **Involve mentorship as a support for students.**
 - *Example:* Utilize peer mentors — college students (such as peer navigators available at some San Diego-Imperial community colleges) or alumni — to provide reassurance through shared experiences, especially to first-generation or underrepresented students, who may benefit from validation of their capabilities.
 - *Example:* Enlist program directors, faculty, guidance counselors, and other adults to serve as long-term mentors tasked with monitoring and guiding students.

- **Recognize the cultural perspectives** of participating students, families, and communities as assets in the program.
 - *Example:* Take the time to learn about the goals that families have for their students, especially those who have been historically marginalized. Learn about cultural norms of their community and apply this knowledge when planning.
 - *Example:* Intentionally seek faculty, administrators, counselors, and students of color from postsecondary institutions, as well as professionals of color from industries, to be mentors or guest speakers.
 - *Example:* Provide translators for families at program events so that all participants can engage and access information.

- **Build relationships with families and communities, not just students,** to ensure buy-in and preparedness to help support students in their transitions to college.
 - *Example:* Communicate with families annually about postsecondary engagement opportunities for their students, and continuously solicit their input.
 - *Example:* Market CTE pathways and their relevance to employment opportunities.
 - *Example:* Hold information events where families in the school community convene, such as places of worship, cultural centers, and community centers.

- **Leverage existing resources.**
 - *Example:* Partner with college staff who engage with K–12, such as K12 Pathway Coordinators, for coordinating campus tours, especially of industry-specific CE programs that can extend students’ CTE/CE pathways.
 - *Example:* Identify opportunities to participate in college-hosted events to learn about programs and areas of study.
 - *Example:* Seek out resources that the county office of education may already be offering such as support for work-based learning or other student experiences.
 - *Example:* Utilize grant funds, such as K12 Strong Workforce and Carl Perkins grants, to build and support connections between CTE, community college, and the workforce.

Postsecondary Engagement Spotlight

Following are two cases featuring how Sweetwater Union High School District and TRACE Alternative School implement unique approaches to provide postsecondary engagement opportunities for students.

SPOTLIGHT: Sweetwater Union High School District – The 10-Year Plan

Sweetwater Union High School District (SUHSD) serves middle and high school students in grades 7 through 12, and in 2018-19, the district inaugurated a new initiative, the 10-Year Plan. Every student in 7th grade embarks on their 10-year plan and graduates from a district high school with a career and college plan for the next four years.

Each year, SUHSD students experience grade-relevant postsecondary engagement activities such as discovering their strengths and interests, exploring careers, leveraging their course-taking options, and learning about options after high school — community college, California State Universities, Universities of California, other 4-year colleges, or career training — to name just a few.

SUHSD's strong relationship with Southwestern College plays an important role in implementing the 10-Year Plan. One way is through specialized campus tours for SUHSD's students in grades 8 and 12. Middle school students, for example, learn about different professions and gain high-level exposure to Southwestern College, while high school seniors are introduced to different Career Education programs and student services at the college, plus complete their college and Promise Grant applications, while on campus. Students in SUHSD's health and education academies can tour the San Ysidro Higher Education Center at Southwestern College to learn about certificates, associate degrees, and a baccalaureate degree offered in education, nursing, and social work.

Southwestern College plays another important role in SUHSD's goal of articulating as many of its CTE courses as possible. Faculty at both institutions collaborate by exchanging course outlines and syllabi, while Southwestern faculty share best practices on how to update CTE curricula and syllabi so that high school CTE courses can be articulated with the college. If a particular CE pathway does not exist at Southwestern, such as welding, SUHSD looks at other community colleges so that all SUHSD students who take CTE classes benefit from an articulation agreement. Through a multitude of engagement approaches such as parent CTE nights to understand pathway continuity from high school to community college to the workforce, communication from counselors, descriptive printed material about course sequences in every CTE secondary-postsecondary pathway, and other CTE events at the high schools, families can see that CTE can be in their student's 10-year plan to and through college. Although, the articulation process requires significant time and persistence, SUHSD's open and ongoing communication with Southwestern College helps to pave the way.

SPOTLIGHT: TRACE Alternative School

This spotlight on TRACE illustrates promising practices used to support students with disabilities. Looking through a universal design lens helps to see that practices aimed at orienting TRACE students to the college campus are applicable to all new students.

At TRACE (Transition Resources for Adult Community Education) Alternative School in San Diego, young adults with mild to moderate disabilities, ages 18–22, can earn their high school diploma while learning independent living skills and gaining job skills in a career pathway. TRACE works with students and leverages their Individual Education Plans to successfully transition them to their next course of study and eventually, employment, by developing a career pathway plan, involving career technical education, if possible, that matches their goal and by providing student supports along the way.

In 2015, TRACE began the Career Technical Education Equity Program (CTEEP) to get more adult students with disabilities into CTE pathways and to support their transition to postsecondary education. The program is seeing success with three-year longitudinal data (2016-17 through 2018-19) showing that more than 90% of students successfully earned course credits.

CTEEP students typically begin by completing the O*NET Interest Profiler, a vocational interest assessment, to identify a “job zone” based on interests and strengths. Students then engage in vocational or career exploration activities such as learning about their careers of interest; exploring two or three high-interest career pathways that may involve touring a pathway program, visiting a local business, job shadowing, and attending a few class sessions in the pathway. Taking the time to provide students with these career exploration activities results in students having a clearer sense about the career they want to pursue and to transitioning successfully. Next, students gain job skills and training through a CTE pathway at the high school or credited or non-credited CE pathway with continuing education, where students earn an industry certificate that can lead to employment or an apprenticeship with one of the many partner employers in the community.

Some students continue to community college after earning their certificate, and the TRACE transition program provides additional supports to bridge the gaps in the transition process to a postsecondary institution. For example, navigating student services can be a barrier for any new student, so TRACE creates opportunities for students to engage with the college campus as soon as they decide that college is the right choice. TRACE teachers take students on personalized two-hour campus tours that include visiting and meeting staff at Disabled Students Programs and Services, the counseling office, and other student services. Students also visit the department of their chosen pathway to observe classrooms and meet professors, which often clinches their pathway commitment.

Helpful Resources

The San Diego-Imperial Counties Community Colleges Regional Consortium (SDICCCRC) has developed useful how-to [guides](#) featuring step-by-step plans, timelines, and itineraries for planning a variety of postsecondary engagement events. The guides are based on the experiences of SDICCCRC staff Heather Cavazos and Monica Rosas, who initially planned, coordinated, and led these events. Be sure to check out the guides for thorough details and tips, as well as lots of additional resources included in each guide.

- [Classroom Presentations with Industry Professionals](#)
- [Industry and Community College Campus Tours](#)
- [Large-Scale College Events](#)
- [Parent Engagement – Career Education Parent Night](#)

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APPENDIX A

High School Career Development Continuum

Out-of-School: Postsecondary Engagement

COMMUNITY COLLEGES
SAN DIEGO & IMPERIAL COUNTIES
CAREER EDUCATION

Self Awareness

Learning about ONESELF

Build awareness of strengths, interests and values and connect this information to future purpose and career through reflection and related metacognitive activities.

Experiences may include:

- Experiencing self as “belonging” among those who attend college, by seeing and speaking with peer role models in college
- Guest speakers from postsecondary
- Links to community-based organizations and clubs that expose students to postsecondary opportunities in areas of interest

Career Awareness

Learning ABOUT a wide variety of careers

Build awareness of the variety of careers available and the preparation required to obtain a career; broaden student options.

Experiences may include:

- Guest speakers from postsecondary
- School-sponsored workshops and one-night events

Career Exploration

Learning ABOUT work and exploring, research and planning for career

Explore career and post-secondary options for the purpose of motivating students and to inform their decision making in secondary school through postsecondary education

Experiences may include:

- Guest speakers from postsecondary
- Interviews with college students
- College tours and on-campus events

Career Preparation

Learning THROUGH work

Apply learning through practical experience that develops knowledge and skills necessary for success in careers and postsecondary education

Experiences may include:

- Guest speakers from postsecondary
- Interviews with college students
- College tours and on-campus events
- College fairs, including interviews with college admissions officers
- Support for application, financial aid, and scholarship process
- Bridge programs
- Dual and concurrent enrollment
- CE coursework leading to certificates and associate degrees
- Preparation for transition to postsecondary

Career Training

Learning FOR work

Train for employment and/or postsecondary education in a specific range of occupations

Experiences may include:

- Core academic preparation
- Support for application, financial aid, and scholarship process
- Semester or year(s)-long college-going experiences
- Dual and concurrent enrollment
- CE coursework leading to certificates and associate degrees
- Preparation for transition to postsecondary