

## THE ROLE OF MENTORING IN COLLEGE ACCESS AND SUCCESS

Given the urgent need to increase access to and success in college for all students, this *Research to Practice* brief distills and synthesizes scholarly research specifically as it pertains to the role of mentoring to promote college access and success, featuring an interview with the leadership of Philadelphia-Futures' Sponsor-A-Scholar program.

Increasing the number of college students who graduate prepared for participation in the workforce and civil society will require a redoubling of efforts to improve college-going and completion rates for students traditionally underrepresented by higher education—individuals from low-income backgrounds and young people of color, who currently earn degrees at much lower rates than other groups (NCES 2010; Mortenson 2009). Given the urgent need to increase the success of underrepresented students in college, individuals from college access programs, youth development organizations, and advocacy groups, along with K–12 and higher education leaders, have an important role to play. Practitioners from college access programs and youth development organizations bring to bear a nuanced understanding of the academic and social supports that enable students at all levels to succeed in high school and college (Savitz-Romer, M., Jager-Hyman, J., and Coles, A. 2009).

Mentoring is a valuable strategy to provide students with the emotional and instrumental support students need to achieve the goal of a college degree. By providing information, guidance, and encouragement, mentors can play an important role in nurturing students' college aspirations, helping them prepare for

college and, advising them on how to make successful transitions from high school to their first year on campus (Levine and Nidiffer 1996). In addition, mentoring for students in college helps students to feel more connected and engaged on campus, which can ultimately improve student outcomes (Pascarella 1980; Community College Survey of Student Engagement 2009).

The prevalence and positive impact of mentoring has generated a large body of social science research on its various dimensions. This brief distills and synthesizes scholarly research specifically as it pertains to the role of mentoring to promote college access and success, with an emphasis on implications for practitioners. It strives to serve as a tangible resource for practitioners seeking to ensure that their efforts—are based in research and targeted in ways that will produce the most positive outcomes for students—particularly given limited program resources.

### Mentoring Defined

Because of the prevalence of mentoring in various settings and the wide range of issues mentors address, scholars have struggled to develop a common definition of the term. In fact, there are over 50 different definitions of



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mentoring in the social science literature (Crisp and Cruz 2009). Some describe mentoring as a concept or process (Roberts 2000), while others use the term to describe a specific set of

activities (Bowman and Bowman 1990; Brown, Davis, and McClendon 1999; Freeman 1999).

Yet, across research studies, common characteristics of mentoring emerge (Eby, Rhodes and Allen 2007). They include: A learning partnership between a more experienced and a less experienced individual (Garvey and Alred 2003); a process involving emotional (friendship, acceptance, support) and instrumental (information, coaching, advocacy, sponsorship) functions (Jacobi 1991; Kram 1985); and a relationship that becomes more impactful over time (Grossman and Rhodes 2002). Others discuss nurturing the mentee's social and psychological development, serving as a role model, and providing support for goal setting and future planning (Cohen and Wills, 1985; Roberts 2000; Miller 2002).

#### **Goals for Students of Different Ages**

Mentoring serves different purposes, especially based on the individual's age and needs. For example, most mentoring for middle and high school students focuses on developing the knowledge, competencies, and confidence needed to successfully undertake their responsibilities (Catalano, Hawkins, Berglund, Pollard, and Arthur 2002). Mentors also help students cope with challenges such as absentee parents, an unstable home situation, or lack of familiarity with the world outside their immediate community (Rauner 2000; Freedman 1993). By contrast, mentoring for students in college is directed toward helping them feel connected to the campus community for improved student outcomes (Pascarella 1980; *Community College Survey of Student Engagement* 2009). Mentoring relationships thus involve the provision of career, social, and emotional support in a safe setting for self-exploration that results in positive academic and personal outcomes for students (Johnson 2006).

### **What the Research Tells Us: Mentoring to Promote College Access and Success**

#### **Impact of Mentoring on College-Going Experiences**

Evidence on the impact of mentoring for college planning and preparation comes from studies of formal mentoring programs and includes the following findings:

- School-based mentoring increases grade promotion and decreases unexcused absences, tardiness, and bullying or fighting in school, while community-based mentoring improves relationships with parents and decreases skipping school (Rhodes, Grossman, and Resch, 2000; Thompson and Kelly-Vance, 2001).

## **Definitions**

### **Informal Mentoring**

Informal mentoring refers to naturally occurring, supportive relationships students have with older and more experienced individuals such as parents, extended family members, neighbors, teachers, ministers, and others with whom students have regular contact. Informal mentoring involves the provision of general guidance and support and, in some instances, helping a student learn something new. It also promotes students' sense of well-being by challenging the negative opinions they may have of themselves and demonstrating that they can have positive relationships with adults (Rhodes, Grossman and Resch, 2000). The relationship may be short- or long-term, but in both instances mentoring has a lasting positive impact on the student. Informal mentoring relationships are far more common than formal ones. A survey of mentors found that 83 percent of those responding indicated their relationships with students were established informally, while only 17 percent worked through formal mentor programs (McLearn, Colsanto and Schoen 1998).

### **Formal Mentoring**

Formal mentoring involves a structured and intentional approach to offering students those experiences and benefits similar to the ones provided by informal mentors. Such initiatives are often facilitated by an agency or program dedicated to this purpose and encompass both one-on-one relationships between an adult and the student, or an older more experienced peer and a younger peer, as well as small groups of students working with an adult or older peer on a particular goal. In all instances, mentoring activities take place at regularly scheduled times over an extended period, and are most often only one component of a comprehensive program (Sipe and Roder, 1999). Formal mentoring programs place a strong emphasis on positive youth development, reducing the likelihood that students will engage in risky behaviors such as poor school attendance or drug use, and community concerns such as civic engagement and college and career exploration. They can be school-based, community-based, and occasionally workplace-based. The sponsoring entity recruits and trains the mentors, matches them with their mentees, and provides support over the duration of the relationship (Allen and Eby 2007).

- Mentoring focuses and motivates students toward achieving learning goals (Gandara, Larsen, Mehan, and Rumberger 1998).
- Youth who perceive high-quality relationships with their mentors experience the best results (Funk and Elk 2002).
- Discussing college with mentors, especially those who have attended themselves, can generate interest in going to college among students whose parents have not gone to college (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper 2002).
- Mentors provide students with important information about college preparatory courses, financial aid and the college admissions process (Gandara and Mejorado 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

High school students in the Philadelphia-based Sponsor-a-Scholar mentoring and scholarship program improved their grades and enrolled in college at significantly higher rates compared with similar students who did not. Those students in the program who had less family support, lower GPAs and low motivation improved the most (Johnson 1999; *Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis* 2009). Similarly, students participating in Puente (a college access program in California that includes a mentoring component) and who received longer, more consistent mentoring had a clearer understanding of college and college planning than those students who had shorter, less satisfying relationships with mentors (Gandara and Mejorado 2005).

### **Impact of Mentoring on College Success**

Evidence on the impact of mentoring for college success mostly comes from studies of informal mentoring and includes the following findings:

- Mentoring by college faculty has a positive impact on students' persistence and academic achievement in college (Crisp and Cruz 2009; Terenzini, Psacarella, and Blimling 1996) and helps prepare them to be successful in professional careers (Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, and Hill 2003).
- Mentoring relationships frequently develop between faculty advisors and advisees assigned to each other who discover the benefits of having a closer and ongoing relationship. (Schlosser and Gelso 2001).
- Mentoring minority college students results in those students being twice as likely to persist as non mentored minority students and to have higher GPAs (Crisp and

Cruz 2009).

- Undergraduates who receive out-of-class mentoring from faculty demonstrated increased academic achievement, while mentored first year students are significantly more likely to return to college for a second year (Terenzini, Psacarella, and Blimling 1996).
- After one year of mentoring by faculty, students with mentors have higher GPAs and are more likely to stay in college compared to academically similar students who do not have mentors (Campbell and Campbell, 1997).
- Students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels report that mentoring helped them develop skills and behaviors necessary to succeed professionally (Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, and Hill 2003).

Less is known about the impact of mentoring by mentors who are not part of the campus community. A 2010 study of Boston public school seniors, who in 2009 graduated and received 'coaching' from staff of community-based college-access organizations through their first year of college, found that students had a 3.5 percent higher persistence rate than 2008 Boston graduates who did not receive such support ( Sum, A., Khatiwada, I., McLaughlin, J. with Palma, S., Motroni, J., Sullivan, N., and Torres, N. 2010). The greatest increases were found among 2009 graduates enrolling in two-year colleges, who had a 77 percent persistence rate compared with 67 percent for 2008 graduates. The study of Sponsor-a-Scholar had a similar positive impact for students during their first year of college; however, by the second year of college, there was no significant difference in persistence and GPA between students who participated in the program and those who did not (Johnson 1999).

### **Implications for College Access Practitioners**

College access professionals starting mentoring programs or improving existing efforts will find many of the effective practices identified through research helpful in ensuring that what they offer is of high quality. These practices, are summarized below along with the dimensions of planning; mentor recruitment, training, and matching; service delivery; and program effectiveness. Recommendations for ways in which college access professionals can utilize such practices in their work are embedded throughout the effective practices.

#### **Planning**

- *Conduct research on student needs and effective strategies for meeting the identified needs.* Programs using theory-

based and evidence-based effective practices produce better outcomes for mentees (DuBois, Holloway et al. 2002) A 2005 study of community-based mentoring programs found that the majority of programs emphasized research as essential to develop an understanding of student needs; a third of this group found that such research took longer than

## Resources

### College Planning Resources Directory

The Pathways College Planning Resources Directory contains more than 100 resources for counselors, teachers, mentors, and families to use in helping middle and high school students plan and prepare for college.

Access the directory at:  
[www.pathwaystocollege.net/Collegeplanningresources](http://www.pathwaystocollege.net/Collegeplanningresources).

### The Finance Project

The Finance Project is a nonprofit research, technical assistance, and training organization specializing in helping organizations working with children, families, and communities to develop sound financial strategies. *Finding Resources to Support Mentoring Programs and Services*, *The Cost of Out-of School Time Programs*, and the *Out-of School Time Cost Calculator* can be downloaded at no cost from the Project's Web site at:

[www.financeproject.org/publications/](http://www.financeproject.org/publications/).

### Mentor

Mentor is a national nonprofit organization that provides resources for mentoring programs, including tools for planning, managing, and evaluation of programs, publications, and a list of states with mentoring partnerships. To learn more, check out [www.mentoring.org](http://www.mentoring.org).

expected (Miller, Drury, Stewart, and Ross 2005.) In researching student needs, college access staff should ask in what ways mentoring could support students in achieving their college goals, how students and their parents will view mentoring, and whether students have time to commit to working with a mentor on a regular basis for at least six months.

- *Develop a theory of action for how the mentoring process will achieve desired student outcomes.* Such a theory is useful in designing training for mentors and assessing the mentoring process (Miller 2007). A common limitation of mentoring programs is the lack of a theoretical framework for how the program will result in change for the mentee (Colley 2003). A theory of action explains the process by which a program or intervention plans to achieve its intermediate and long-term outcome objectives and provides a framework for an organization to examine whether or how its activities connect to its goals and projected outcomes.
- *Recruit and involve key stakeholders and organizations in planning.* Securing the support of schools and other key partners is critical to securing resources such as referrals of students in need of mentoring, places for mentors and mentees to meet, and access to data for evaluation purposes (Portwood, Ayers, Kinnison, Waris, and Wise 2005; Miller et. al, 2005). In terms of the planning process, college access practitioners should identify and engage partners who can provide needed resources such as helping to recruit and train mentors. Involving such partners from the start is especially important for programs with limited resources. In recruiting partners, practitioners should identify specific ways in which each partner will benefit from collaborating with their program.
- *Identify and secure the infrastructure, resources, and financial support to operate the program for at least 12 months.* The few studies on the costs of mentoring programs found they ranged from \$200 to \$6,000 per student (Fountain and Arbretton 1999; Yates 2005). Given budgetary constraints, it is critical to estimate the costs of implementing a mentoring program and determine from where the resources to cover these costs will be obtained. Possible approaches include redirecting resources from an existing activity, in-kind contributions from partners, and external sources such as AmeriCorps, GEAR UP, private sector funders, and philanthropies. It also is a valuable exercise to determine the

cost-benefit of mentoring for the students served. The Finance Project has a calculator for determining the cost of an after-school mentoring program and an excellent publication on finding the funds to support mentoring.

### **Mentor Recruitment, Training, and Matching**

- *Create a work plan and marketing materials for recruiting mentors.* A written plan with specific recruitment goals and the resources needed to achieve these goals provides assurance that the plan will be successful (Jucovy 2001). Recruiting mentors who will make a commitment of at least a year can be challenging. College access programs will find it helpful to partner with organizations that have a ready source of potential mentors who can meet the needs of their students. Local service clubs, professional associations, AmeriCorps programs, college alumni groups, and school volunteer organizations are examples of such organizations.
- *Develop a process and criteria for screening, selecting, and matching mentors with mentees.* Mentors who have experience with a 'helping' role such as social work, tutoring, teaching, health care, etc., are more effective than mentors with other backgrounds (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper 2002). Engaging board and advisory committee members along with staff in developing a process and criteria for selecting and matching mentors with students will ensure that mentors understand the mentoring program and will actively support it. With regard to pairing mentors and students, it is useful to give them the opportunity to become acquainted and assess the comfort level of each with the other before finalizing a match.
- *Develop and implement an ongoing mentor training program.* Training that continues throughout the mentoring process produces the greatest positive effects on mentees (DuBois et al. 2002) Mentors have also observed that the most effective training is the mentoring process itself with time to discuss their experience with other mentors (Sipe 1996). There are many high quality, free resources for training mentors on the Web sites of national organizations dedicated to encouraging the development of and providing support for mentoring programs. Local colleges and universities and nonprofit organizations with established mentoring programs can also assist with training activities.

### **Delivery of Mentoring Services**

- *Require that mentors commit to meet regularly with their*

*mentees for a minimum of six months and preferably 12 months.* The longer and more consistent the mentoring relationship is, the greater the likelihood of it having a positive impact on the mentee. (Sipe 1999; Meorado, 2000; Foster 2001; DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper 2002). Relationships that last less than six months are unlikely to achieve the goals of the mentoring program or have a positive impact on student achievement.

- *Provide mentors with ongoing support in arranging structured and engaging activities with their mentees.* A structured process for mentoring increases the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper 2002). Staff should check with mentors and students regularly on how they are faring in their relationship with each other and what concerns, if any, either may have. Doing so will make it possible to quickly identify and intervene on problems that arise. In addition, it is valuable to structure time for mentors to meet and learn from each other's experiences. Mentors report that sharing their experiences in this way is the most valuable training they receive.
- *Encourage parents and other family members to support the involvement of the mentee with the mentor.* While family members should not participate directly in the mentoring process, their support of the relationship will increase the likelihood that mentors and mentees will achieve their shared goals (Rhodes et al. 2000; DuBois et al. 2002; Rhodes 2005). College access practitioners will find it beneficial to communicate with parents/guardians about the goals of mentoring and activities it involves and address whatever concerns they may have about their child having a mentoring relationship. Parents also need to understand why it is important that they support their child's involvement with a mentor.

### **Monitoring Program Effectiveness**

- *Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the mentoring relationships on an ongoing basis* (Slicker and Palmer 1993). Establishing measureable outcomes for mentor/student relationships is essential to determine the impact of mentoring on students and the degree to which it is contributing to the college access program's goals.
- *Use multiple indicators to assess the impact of mentoring.* Measures should encompass both process and outcome indicators, and where available, use established benchmarks

for comparison purposes (Miller 2005). Examples of indicators for assessing the impact of mentoring can be found on the Web sites of national organizations promoting the development of quality mentoring programs. It is wise to develop a system for tracking mentor/mentee contacts and activities from the outset to the conclusion of the relationship as part of the planning process, so that it can be implemented as soon as the program begins and captures the full breadth of interaction between the mentor and mentee.

- *Document the cost-effectiveness of investing in mentoring as an intervention that results in positive outcomes for students.* Mentoring programs that can demonstrate their value are more likely to be sustained over time (Fountain and Arberton 1999; Yates 2005). Cost-benefit studies of college access mentoring programs involve calculations of the costs incurred when students do not go to college compared to the expense of operating the program and also the public benefits of students completing a college education.

Pertinent social science research on the role of mentoring in college access and success can help practitioners at the K-12 and higher education levels assess how—with limited resources—they can implement a mentoring program that will support students along the high school-to-college continuum, and ultimately improve student outcomes and completion rates. ☞

## Lessons from the Field: Philadelphia Futures

Philadelphia Futures helps local low-income public high school students enter—and succeed in college. Its Sponsor-A-Scholar (SAS) program offers a comprehensive array of services including long-term, one-on-one mentoring; academic enrichment and college guidance; funds for college-related expenses; and staff support. Philadelphia Futures Executive Director Joan C. Mazzotti and SAS Program Director Ann-Therese Ortiz have provided leadership to the organization for more than a decade.



Joan C. Mazzotti



Ann-Therese Ortiz

### **1. Mentoring is only one component of Philadelphia Futures' SAS program. As a practitioner, how have you found this component to be vital to college access and success?**

The mentoring component provides the student development and hands-on assistance that students need throughout the college-going experience. Mentors offer a sense of consistency as students transition from high school into college.

SAS mentors provide students with exposure to viable career opportunities, networking, and a broader view of the world. Mentors also help students to understand the soft skills that are important for success on a college campus, such as public speaking and interpersonal, problem-solving, and self-advocacy

skills. As students prepare for college, many mentors assist their students with college applications and take their mentees on college tours and second looks at a given college. Many mentors have helped their students with packing and even transportation to college and are an invaluable support as they matriculate.

### **2. How structured is the relationship between a SAS student and mentor?**

Every SAS mentoring relationship has a clear and structured goal of college success, and all mentoring activities are related to that ultimate goal. Mentors and students can design their own activities, but SAS staff members also provide suggestions and ideas. While students are in high school, mentors are expected to meet face-to-face once a month for quality time and

relationship building, have a weekly phone conversation, and regularly attend SAS events with their mentees.

The relationship is structured to be long term and develop over time and lasts from the beginning of high school, when the students first enter the program, through at least the first year of college. The relationship starts with a focus on trust development. As the student matriculates through high school, the relationship focuses on college-readiness skills, the college admissions process, and the college selection process. Once the student graduates, the relationship focuses on a successful transition into and through college.

### **3. How does SAS staff support a long-term and enduring relationship between mentors and students? What types of challenges arise in maintaining that relationship through high school and college?**

SAS staff members are in constant contact with all stakeholders in the mentoring relationship, including mentors, students, parents, and guardians. Staff members work with mentors to troubleshoot, encourage, and celebrate the mentorship experience. SAS staff members also find that it is important to contextualize the relationship for mentors who may come from a different background and generation than their students.

Throughout the mentoring period, SAS staff members provide mentors with formalized professional development to support students, contact mentors monthly by phone and Email, and send monthly newsletter updates.

The constant contact is particularly important in regard to troubleshooting challenges the mentor and mentee may face together. Because SAS begins in the ninth grade, a general challenge for mentors is working with teenagers who at this phase in their lives are navigating personal development. Another challenge in making this long-term commitment is dealing with life changes. During the course of the relationship, some mentors may get married, have children, or have to relocate. However, we have found that relationship-altering challenges are the exception, not the norm. Mentors come into the experience knowing that the expectation is for the relationship to be long term.

### **4. What role do parents play in the SAS mentoring relationship?**

Parents understand that mentoring is a key element of the SAS program and are present during the match meetings when mentors are paired with their students. During this initial meeting,

parents are able to meet their child's mentor and set boundaries and expectations. However, the parents' primary role is to be a supporter of the relationship.

### **5. How does the SAS program assess students' satisfaction with their mentorship experiences?**

SAS coordinators monitor every mentoring relationship on both a formal and informal basis by talking with students and mentors. The SAS director conducts a quarterly, formal discussion with each student's SAS coordinator to discuss the quality of the mentor match, academic progress, participation, and parent involvement. In the past, SAS has used an independent organization to conduct a formal survey of mentors past and present. But generally, mentoring evaluations are done by constant monitoring of current relationships.

SAS looks not only at the satisfaction of the student, but at the strength of the mentoring relationship overall. SAS finds that most students will say that they are satisfied, but the program is focused on strengthening and deepening the relationship to best prepare the students for college success. By reviewing program performance on a regular basis, staff members are able to evaluate the effectiveness of program components and make mid-course corrections, improvements, and enhancements as they become necessary.

### **6. The majority of literature on mentoring in college focuses on faculty mentors and graduate students. How do your undergraduate scholars benefit from having a SAS mentor, especially a non-faculty mentor?**

The SAS program believes that it is critically important to have both a non-faculty mentor and a faculty mentor once the students are in college. Although the role of a faculty mentor is important for academic issues, it includes a power dynamic. SAS mentors offer unconditional support.

SAS mentors help students with life issues—often helping students explore careers, find jobs, and make living arrangements. While faculty mentors have many students and several mentees, SAS mentors offer one-on-one support and provide personal encouragement.

It is also important to consider that first-generation students may not always be prepared to begin college and immediately reveal their vulnerabilities to faculty members. Because SAS mentors have established a history with the student where they already know their vulnerabilities prior to college, they are in a position to support student success. 

## Resources

**Corporation for National and Community Services Resource Center**—The federal agency that oversees the national AmeriCorps program has a wide array of training tools and materials. **Web Site:** [www.nationalserviceresources.org/learns/mentoring-training](http://www.nationalserviceresources.org/learns/mentoring-training)

**The Finance Project**—A nonprofit research, technical assistance, and training organization specializing in helping organizations working with children, families and communities to develop sound financial strategies. The publication, *Finding Resources to Support Mentoring Programs and Services, The Cost of Out-of School Time Programs, and the Out-of School Time Cost Calculator*, can be downloaded at no cost from the organization's Web site. **Web Site:** [www.financeproject.org/publications/](http://www.financeproject.org/publications/)

**Mentor**—A national nonprofit organization providing resources for mentoring programs, including tools for planning, managing, and evaluating programs, publications, and a list of states with mentoring partnerships. **Web Site:** [www.mentoring.org](http://www.mentoring.org)

**Mentoring Forums**—A Web site where people interested in youth mentoring across the United States share innovative practices, lessons learned, and other information on mentoring programs. **Web Site:** [mentoringforums.educationnorthwest.org](http://mentoringforums.educationnorthwest.org)

**National CARES Mentoring Movement**—A national organization that recruits and connects mentors with local organizations to help African-American children achieve academic and social success. **Web Site:** [www.caresmentoring.org/](http://www.caresmentoring.org/)

**National Mentoring Center**—A national training and technical assistance provided and operated by Education Northwest with comprehensive program development materials and curricula for mentoring programs and professionals. **Web Site:** [educationnorthwest.org/nmc](http://educationnorthwest.org/nmc)

**Public Private Ventures**—A national nonprofit research agency that has conducted numerous rigorous research studies on all aspects of mentoring. The studies are available at no cost on the organization's Web site. **Web Site:** [www.ppv.org/ppv/mentoring.asp](http://www.ppv.org/ppv/mentoring.asp)

**U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Resource Center**—Resources and technical assistance for the U.S. Department of

Education Mentoring Program grantees and other mentoring programs. **Web Site:** [www.edmentoring.org](http://www.edmentoring.org)

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## About the Pathways to College Network and NCAN

### About the Pathways to College Network

The Pathways to College Network is an alliance of national organizations that advances college opportunity for underserved students by raising public awareness, supporting innovative research, and promoting evidence-based policies and practices across the K—12 and higher education sectors. Pathways promotes the use of research-based policies and practices, the development of new research that is both rigorous and actionable, and the alignment of efforts across middle school, high school, and higher education in order to promote college access and success for underserved students. To learn more about the Pathways to College Network, please visit [www.pathwaystocollege.net](http://www.pathwaystocollege.net).

### About the National College Access Network

The National College Access Network (NCAN) is a partner organization of the Pathways to College Network. Incorporated in 1995, the mission of the NCAN is to build, strengthen, and empower communities committed to college access and success so that all students, especially those underrepresented in post-secondary education, can achieve their educational dreams. Through advising and financial assistance, our members share a commitment to encourage and enable students to set and achieve educational goals. To learn more about NCAN, please visit [www.collegeaccess.org/](http://www.collegeaccess.org/).