RE-ENGAGING DISCOURAGED LEARNERS: A CASE STUDY OF THE ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM AT WALLA WALLA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Introduction

As American communities become increasingly diverse, especially with the influx of Latino immigrants, so do the populations of American public schools. However, a UCLA Civil Rights study found that high schools today are more segregated than they were at the time of Brown v. Board of Education.[1] Nonwhite students are often concentrated in "dropout factory" high schools that serve to perpetuate income inequalities along racial divides by withholding the greatest tool of social mobility: access to a quality education. This is especially critical given the increased importance of a college degree in the labor market. Even President Obama, in his address to Congress, warned: "In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer a pathway to opportunity, it is a prerequisite."[2] With the stakes higher than ever, we must critically examine the condition of education for nonwhite students, and be willing to imagine alternatives to a system that in many ways does less for these students than ever before.

Washington State, with its large Latino population and commitment to education reform, can serve as a progressive example when examining these issues. Census data shows that Washington's Latino population increased by more than 71 percent between 2000 and 2010, and as of 2011, Latino students made up 19 percent of the K-12 school population. In response to this dramatic demographic shift, and the continued racial disparities in high school dropout rates,

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[1] Gary Orfield, "Reviving the Goal of an Integrated Society: A 21st Century Challenge" (The Civil Rights Project/ Proyectos Derechos Civiles at UCLA: 2009), 9.

[2] Barack Obama, "Address to the Joint Session of Congress" (2009), *Whitehouse.gov*, accessed March 5, 2014, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-of-President-Barack-Obama-Address-to-Joint-Session-of-Congress/

Washington has taken action to redefine its mainstrem school system. In the recently decided *McCleary, et al. v. State of Washington*, the State Supreme Court found that Washington fell short on its promise to deliver a quality education to "all children within its borders," and required the state to "amply fund education of all children before it funds other State efforts or programs."[3] This commitment to education resulted in concrete changes to Washington State policy, and efforts to address the dropout problem not only through prevention, but also through the re-engagement of students who have already dropped out. The Open Doors Youth Reengagement effort, while still very new, aims to support the needs of the dropout population, but admits that more data must be collected on the common barriers facing disengaged youth so that their needs can be more sufficiently, and efficiently, supported.[4] The fact that Washington State committed to a statewide effort to address the dropout problem and the changing needs of its student population validates the need for further research into the real needs of modern American students, as well as into the program models and educational strategies that can best empower disengaged students to realize success.

This report addresses exactly these issues through a case study of the Alternative Education Program (AEP) in Walla Walla, WA. Specifically, we set out to evaluate the potential for alternative programs to increase both high school graduation and college matriculation rates among nonwhite students. Our community partners Brian Gabbard, an AEP instructor, and Kim Cassetto, the High School Programs Director, helped us reach out to both current and graduated

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[3] "Supreme Court Order re: McClearly, et al. v. State," (2014), accessed March 6, 2014, http://www.courts.wa.gov/content/Briefs/A08/843627%20answer%20and%20statement%20of%20grounds.pdf

[4] "Open Doors Youth Reengagement," Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, accessed March 5, 2014, https://www.k12.wa.us/GATE/SupportingStudents/StudentRetrieval.aspx

Latino students so that we could learn from their firsthand experiences. In our interviews and focus group we sought to answer questions such as: What circumstances, academic or otherwise, create discouraged learners (a term we use in lieu of "at-risk students" for reasons we discuss later in this report)? What can we learn from student experiences about the best practices for alternative programs? And how well does an experience in alternative education prepare students for life beyond high school? We found that asking students about their lives both pre- and post-AEP, as well as their experience within the program, gave us a holistic understanding of the need and potential for alternative programs. While there has been substantial research into common barriers to graduation, there is a paucity of research concerning the effectiveness of alternative programs, and few studies put the problems facing students in direct relation to possible solutions. By setting up this comparison, we were able to identify the characteristics of AEP that most directly responded to the needs of students, as well as offer critical feedback on how the program can be improved. We found that personal teacher-student relationships, program flexibility, and an emphasis on the personal responsibility of the student helped to mitigate stressors and responsibilities facing students outside the classroom. The overwhelmingly positive student reviews of AEP validate the need for other states and communities to consider alternatives to mainstream classrooms that draw from the AEP model. More research should be dedicated to exploring the possibilities of alternative programs to empower all young people with a quality education, and student voices should be taken into account in the development of these new programs. This report seeks to contribute to that vital research endeavor.

Literature Review

Recent statistics from the U.S. Department of Education reveal a national decrease in status dropout rates.[5] However, pronounced disparities continue to exist in the dropout rates of different racial demographics. In 2011, the dropout rate for Whites was 5 percent, compared to 7 percent for Black students, and 14 percent for Latinos.[6] However, these statistics vary drastically by school district. The high dropout rates for Latinos are especially problematic given that they "form the largest minority group in the U.S. and are growing more rapidly than any other ethnic group."[7] This does not bode well for the future of the increasingly knowledge-based national economy, in which " educated and skilled labour [is] more valuable, and unskilled labour less so."[8] As the economy continues to shift in this direction, minorities will become increasingly marginalized into low-skill, low-wage jobs. Much of this inequality begins in the education system. To address this alarming trend, researchers examine the factors that cause students, and disproportionately minority students, to drop out of high school; these include, but are not limited to, teen parenthood, undocumented status, gang affiliation, and a lack of social support. Beyond merely assessing the problem, scholars also investigate possible solutions. Research shows that alternative education programs can increase high school graduation rates and college matriculation rates among student populations who are most disadvantaged in the modern

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[5] The *status dropout rate* represents the percentage of 16-24 year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a General Educational Development [GED] certificate.) Moving forward with this report, we will use "dropout rate" to refer always to the status dropout rate; Aud S. Wilkinson-Flicker, S., Kristapovich, P., Rathbun, A., Wang, X., and Zhang, J, "The Condition of Education 2013," *U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics*, (2013).

[6] Wilkinson-Flicker et al., "The Condition of Education 2013."

[7] Peterson-Beeton, Renee, "Minority Students' Perspectives on Chemistry in an Alternative High School," *Qualitative Report* 12 no. 4 (2007).

[8] Operation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), "Education at a Glance 2012: Highlights" OECD Publishing (2012).

mainstream education system.

Barriers to Graduation

Some of the strongest dropout predictors are "parental education, occupation, and income -- in other words, socioeconomic status [SES.]"[9] Low SES students are subject to factors that can negatively affect their education, such as a single parent home, low engagement in school and community, stressful home environments, and lack of access to quality early education. [10] What is perpetuated are cycles of poverty and low-education attainment that hinder social mobility for minority and low-income families. Olsen argues that part of the blame falls on the system of mainstream education itself, which is "structured to provide college accessibility for a select few with severe limitations on college access for the majority; the primary limitation [is] on minorities and low socioeconomic status (SES) students."[11] This leaves these already-disadvantaged students in a difficult position: stuck in a model of education that was not designed to prepare them for higher education, and facing a labor market that increasingly requires a postsecondary degree. The negative factors associated with low SES are repeatedly identified as underlying disadvantages that exacerbate other barriers to graduation.

Previous scholarship identified social support as a pivotal factor affecting academic achievement. Malecki and Demaray describe social support as "an individual's perception of

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[9] John H. Tyler, and Magnus Lofstrom, "Finishing High School: Alternative Pathways and Dropout Recovery," *Future of Children* 19, no. 1 (March 1, 2009).

[10] Jodi Swanson, Carlos Valiente, and Kathryn Lemery-Chalfant, "Predicting academic achievement from cumulative home risk: The mediating roles of effortful control, academic relationships, and school avoidance," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2012): 375-408.

[11] Lynette Olsen, "Aztec Middle College: High School Alternatives in Community Colleges," *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 34, no. 8 (January 1, 2010).

general support or specific supportive behaviors from people in their social network, which enhances their functioning and/or may buffer them from adverse outcomes."[12] Positive social support is associated with goal construction, an increase in academic aspirations and long-term thinking, and escalated school engagement, all positive indicators of increased academic achievement.[13] When scholars have researched adolescent social support networks, they emphasize parents, teachers, and peers as the most influential members of these support systems.[14]

The strength of the relationship between perceived social support and academic achievement varies depending on the type of relationship. The role of the supporter, be they a parent, teachers or peer, as well as the age of the child receiving this support, are all factors to consider.[15] However, regardless of age, race, or type of relationship, students who perceive higher levels of support fare better academically than their less supported counterparts.[16] Taylor showed that parental support is an incredibly important protective factor for adolescents, and

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[12] Michelle Kilpatrick Demaray and Christine Kerres Malecki, "Critical levels of perceived social support associated with student adjustment," *School Psychology Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (2002): 215.

[13] Grace Kao and Marta Tienda, "Optimism and achievement: The educational performance of immigrant youth," *Social science quarterly* 76 (1995).

[14] Kathryn R. Wentzel, "Social relationships and motivation in middle school: The role of parents, teachers, and peers," Journal of educational Psychology 90, no. 2 (1998); Demaray and Malecki, "Critical levels of perceived social support."

[15] Sandra Yu Rueger et al., "Relationship between multiple sources of perceived social support and psychological and academic adjustment in early adolescence: Comparisons across gender," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 39, no. 1 (2010).

[16] Mary J. Levitt et al., "Social support and achievement in childhood and early adolescence: A multicultural study," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 15, no. 2 (1994); Kathryn R. Wentzel, "Social relationships and motivation in middle school."

may alleviate some of the challenges facing low-income students.[17] However, he found that these low-income students are often those with the least access to positive social support.[18] When it comes to teacher support, several studies found that caring relationships in the classroom increase the likelihood of positive academic outcomes.[19] Levitt et al. did a study of multiracial, mixed socioeconomic status adolescents and found that all demographics were equally benefited, in terms of standardized testing and improved GPA, by supportive teachers.[20] Ellenbogen and Chamberland also identified school friendship networks as a factor that influences high school academic engagement.[21] When they compared the characteristics of friends and the nature of peer relations between at-risk and not at-risk students, the results indicated that at-risk students had more dropout friends, more working friends, and fewer school friends.[22] The combination of peer, parental, and teacher support has a sizeable influence on student academic achievement, and the lack thereof can derail students from the graduation track.

Teens lacking in sufficient social support systems are more likely to join gangs as they search for a family-like environment and social acceptance. Studies show that male teens from

[17] Ronald D. Taylor, "Risk and resilience in low-income African American families: Moderating effects of kinship social support," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 16, no. 3 (2010).

[18] Ronald D. Taylor, "Risk and resilience in low-income African American families."

[19] Ann B. Brewster and Gary L. Bowen, "Teacher support and the school engagement of Latino middle and high school students at risk of school failure," *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 21, no. 1 (2004); Kathryn R. Wentzel, "Social relationships and motivation in middle school."

[20] Mary J. Levitt et al., "Social support and achievement in childhood and early adolescence."

[21] Stephen Ellenbogen and Claire Chamberland, "The peer relations of dropouts: a comparative study of at-risk and not at-risk youths," *Journal of adolescence* 20, no. 4 (1997).

[22] Mary J. Levitt et al., "Social support and achievement in childhood and early adolescence."

low SES backgrounds are most likely to pursue violent outlets, such as gang membership, which decreases their academic engagement and increases their chance of dropping out.[23] Gang affiliated teenagers often share social circles with peers who reinforce negative behavior, and scholars stress the power of peer influence on educational decision-making, especially when teens lack social support in the home.[24] Researchers argue that these students develop a mindset of being "too cool for school" as a product of their surrounding violence, and their primary community becomes the streets, not the schools.[25] Gang affiliation, and its associated criminal behaviors and substance abuse problems, can produce an environment that "interferes with learning, decreases the chance of graduating, [and] reduces the likelihood of entering or completing post-high school education."[26] Such studies draw a clear link between gang involvement and elevated drop out rates among high school students, especially those without other forms of social support.

Behavioral problems can alert schools to potentially at-risk students, and are often indicative of circumstances facing the student outside the school. Studies demonstrate a correlation between both low-income households and level of parent's education, in other words, socioeconomic status with misbehavior patterns in teen students.[27] The National Education

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[23] Irving A. Spergal, "Youth gangs: Continuity and change," *Crime & Justice* 12 (1990): 171.

[24] Harriett D. Romo, and Toni Falbo, *Latino high school graduation: Defying the odds*, (University of Texas Press: 2010). 211.

[25] Jeremy Staff, and Derek A. Kreager, "Too Cool for School? Violence, Peer Status and High School Dropout," *Social Forces* 87 (2008): 471.

[26] Jeremy D. Finn, Reva M. Fish, and Leslie A. Scott, "Educational Sequelae of High School Misbehavior," *Journal of Education Research* 101 no. 5 (2008): 259.

[27] Finn et al., "Educational Sequelae of High School Misbehavior," 266.

Longitudinal Study of 1988 found no link between behavioral problems and race.[28] However, Moreno and Gaytan found Latino students to be overrepresented in the disability category of emotional and behavioral disorders.[29] Together, these studies show that it is not race per se that affects these students' emotional and behavioral well being, but rather the stressors of low SES that disproportionately face racial minorities.

In fact, research shows how the disciplinary reactions to common behavioral problems can actually exacerbate academic disengagement. Suspension, a common punitive reaction, is a strong indicator of high school non-completion, even though the incidents that inspire the punishment are often trivial. Losen and Martinez found that "one out of every nine secondary school students was suspended at least once during that 2009-2010 academic year…[for] minor infractions of school rules, such as disrupting class, tardiness, and dress code violations, rather than for serious violent or criminal behavior."[30] Couple this with Balfanz's finding that suspension for ninth grade students "is associated with a two fold increase in the likelihood of dropping out, from 16% for those not suspended to 32% for those suspended just once," and we can see how suspension itself can serve as a barrier to graduation.[31] Ehrenreich found that the

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[28] U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *National Longitudinal Education Study of 1988.*

[29] Gerardo Moreno, and Francisco X. Gaytán, "Reducing Subjectivity in Special Education Referrals by Educators Working with Latino Students: Using Functional Behavioral Assessment as a Pre-Referral Practice in Student Support Teams," *Emotional & Behavioral Difficulties* 18 no.1 (2013): 88.

[30] Daniel J. Losen, and Tia Elena Martinez, "Out of School and Off Track: The Overuse of Suspensions in American Middle and High Schools," *Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles* (1).

[31]Robert Balfanz, Vaughan Byrnes, and Joanna Fox, "Sent home and put off-track: The antecedents, disproportionalities, and consequences of being suspended in the ninth grade," *The Center for Civil Rights Remedies*, (2013): 12

"excessively punitive" nature of mainstream education made it "easier to fail than pass."[32]

Instead of working with students to address the underlying issues of behavioral problems,

suspension encourages disengagement from the school community.

Homelessness, like behavioral problems, is often indicative of underlying issues facing

the student outside the classroom. Although a broad range of living situations can be

encompassed by the word "homelessness," we define homelessness according to Hendricks and

Barkley's definition of "residential instability."[33] Their study of homelessness and academic

performance found that housing status was significantly related to reading comprehension and

math scores on the End Of Grade test (EOG). Stably housed children did better on all four EOG

tests.[34] However, some researchers suggest that homelessness does not act in isolation to affect

academic achievement, rather the situational factors that explain homelessness may also explain

poor academic outcomes.[35] The added stressors and responsibilities that come with

homelessness, coupled with social factors like low SES that often lead youth and families to

become homeless in the first place, can interfere with a students ability to succeed academically.

Similar to scholarly disputes about the relationship between homelessness and

academics, researchers disagree on the exact nature of the relationship between teen pregnancy

and increased dropout rates. Some argue that the increased responsibilities associated with teen

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[32] Heidi Ehrenreich, Patricia M. Reeves, Summar Corley, and Pamela Orpinas, "With Graduation in Sight: Perceptions of High- and Low-Aggression Students of the Journey to High School Completion," *School Psychology Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (December 1, 2012): 202.

[33] George E. Hendricks, and William M. Barkley, "The Academic Effect of Homelessness: An Important Role for School Social Workers," *School Social Work Journal* 36, no. 1 (2011).

[34] Hendricks et al., "The Academic Effect of Homelessness."

[35] John C. Buckner, Ellen L. Bassuk, and Linda F. Weinreb, "Predictors of academic achievement among homeless and low-income housed children," *Journal of School Psychology* 39, no. 1 (2001): 45-69.

parenthood lead directly to low educational attainment, while others maintain that pre-existing

environmental factors, like poverty and unstable housing, which are disproportionately common

for teen parents, exert a larger influence on academics.[36] A combination of both these views

seems to be the most likely. The disparities in teen birth-rates across racial demographics mirrors

the disparities in dropout rates, disadvantaging minority groups.[37] Because these mothers often

do not complete high school, their children are more likely to be teen parents themselves.[38] Thus,

teen pregnancy can exacerbate inter-generational cycles of poverty.

Undocumented students face barriers to educational attainment completely unique to their

status. Many arrive in the United States with their families hoping for a better future, however

legal institutions prevent them from ever obtaining a postsecondary degree. Undocumented

students, "do not qualify for any form of government sponsored financial assistance, are not

eligible to apply for a driver's license, are legally barred from formal employment, and may be

deported at any time."[39] In 1982 the U.S Supreme Court Case of *Plyer v. Doe* ruled that K-12

education must be guaranteed to all students regardless of their legal status.[40] This guaranteed

complete primary and secondary education for undocumented students, however, access to

postsecondary education continues to be barred by other federal restrictions. The Illegal

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[36] Charles E. Basch, "Teen pregnancy and the achievement gap among urban minority youth," *Journal of School Health* 81, no. 10 (2011): 614-618.

[37] Basch, "Teen pregnancy and the achievement."

[38] Basch, "Teen pregnancy and the achievement."

[39] William Pérez, Richard D. Cortés, Karina Ramos, and Heidi Coronado, "Academic Resilience Among Undocumented Latino Students," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 31, no. 2 (2009): 149-181.

[40] William Pérez, Richard D. Cortés, Karina Ramos, Heidi Coronado, "'Cursed and blessed': Examining the socioemotional and academic experiences of undocumented Latina and Latino college students," *New Directions for Student Services* no. 131 (2010): 36.

Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA) restricts such students from enrolling in higher education by preventing them from receiving any government aid.[41] Research highlights that of "80,000 undocumented students who graduate high school, only 13,000 will actually enroll in public colleges and universities across the country."[42] In an attempt to increase educational attainment among undocumented youth, the federal government introduced the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act in 2003. This act provides a pathway to permanent residency for undocumented students while also facilitating higher education attainment. The DREAM act allows students access to federal scholarship funds and also makes them eligible for work permits.[43] Although the act has yet to be passed nationally by either the House or the Senate, similar versions have been implemented in Washington and other states.[44] These are only the structural obstacles facing undocumented students, but it is important to remember that these students also face unique emotional challenges due to their status that can have equally detrimental effects on their journey to high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment.[45]

As demonstrated by prior scholarship, students can face many barriers to graduation, both individual and environmental, that often compound to disproportionately disadvantage low-SES students in the classroom. When closely examining factors such as behavioral problems, gang

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[41] Edward Drachman, "Access to Higher Education for Undocumented Students," *Peace Review* 18 no. 1 (2006): 92.

[42] J. S. Passel, "The size and characteristics of the unauthorized migration population in the U.S.: Estimates based on the March 2005 current population survey," *Pew Hispanic Center* (2006).

[43] "Dream Act Portal," accessed February 10, 2014, <http://dreamact.info/>

[44] Drachman, "Access to Higher Education for Undocumented Students," 97-98.

[45] Pérez et al., "Cursed and Blessed," 37.

affiliation, teen pregnancy and homelessness, scholars often find low-SES and inadequate social support to be the underlying causes. The close relationship between low-SES and many of the common barriers that lead to high school non-completion can result in inter-generational cycles of low academic achievement that hinder social mobility, especially for minority students. While undocumented status is a unique barrier, the barring of undocumented students from postsecondary education also perpetuates these cycles. A lack of resources in mainstream education for students facing these barriers perpetuates disengagement from the classroom, and increases the probability that these students will not graduate. Alternative schools have the potential to reverse this cycle of disengagement by tailoring their programs to the specific needs of each student, and empowering discouraged learners to take ownership of their education.

Models and characteristics of alternative education programs:

There is an undisputed need for systemic changes in education to address the dropout problem, but so far the solutions are scarce, and unsupported by research. According to the NCES, 39 percent of public school districts have made efforts to reach students who have been unsuccessful in mainstream education, but there is no unifying definition of what constitutes an alternative program.[46] The lack of uniformity between programs makes it difficult to assess efficacy, and to make generalizations about the alternative system as a whole. Grouped under the label of "alternative" are programs that target dropout prevention, as well as those that serve students who have already dropped out. Also included are both short-term and long-term

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[46] Cheryl M. Lange and Sandra J. Sletten, "Alternative education: A brief history and research synthesis," *National Association of State Directors of Special Education*, (Alexandria, VA: 2002): 20; Rebecca Porch and Elizabeth Farris, "Public alternative schools and programs for students at risk of education failure: 2000-01." *National Center for Education Statistics* (Washington, DC: 2002): iii.

programs, and programs based in traditional high schools as well as those situated autonomously

or on college campuses.[47] Attempting to classify alternative programs into distinct categories, as

Raywid proposed, is limiting; studies are more successful in evaluating individual characteristics

of models that, in various combinations, worked to meet the needs of at risk students.[48]

Morrissette conducted a study of student experiences within alternative education and the

most prominent theme that emerged was the importance of "ambiance."[49] This he describes as a

non-intimidating learning environment where students feel respected, supported, and emotionally

safe.[50] This depends most heavily on authentic teacher-student relationships, which create a

"culture of caring" within the classroom.[51] Supportive learning environments can alleviate the

negative effects of inadequate social support at home or from peer groups, which have been

identified as leading factors in high school non-completion. In fact, Morrissette goes on to say

that, "the ability to absorb and understand course content is secondary to learners and that

learning hinges on the learning environment and interpersonal relationships."[52] Olsen agrees, and

criticizes the student-teacher hierarchy promoted by mainstream education. She argues that

students internalize their inferior intellectual position, which reduces their ability to think

critically. On the other hand, she posits, a pedagogical relationship built on trust and mutual

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[47] Cheryl M. Lange and Sandra J. Sletten, "Alternative education," 20.

[48] Mary Anne Raywid, "Alternative schools: The state of the art." *Educational Leadership* 52, no. 1 (1995)

[49] Patrick John Morrissette, "Exploring Student Experiences Within the Alternative High School Context," *Canadian Journal of Education* 34, no. 2 (January 1, 2011): 177.

[50] Patrick John Morrissette, "Exploring Student Experiences," 177.

[51] Lynette Olsen, "Aztec Middle College," 672.

[52] Patrick John Morrissette, "Exploring Student Experiences," 185.

respect can empower students in the classroom.[53] Overall, programs are most successful for

students when student-teacher relationships are prioritized as much as academic instruction.

Alternative programs that coupled a supportive learning environment with an

academically rigorous curriculum found greater success than those that took a remedial

approach. Academic rigor in an environment that encourages students to develop their own

learning style can bring out the best in students who internalized low academic expectations,

resulting in accelerated learning and a sense of personal responsibility.[54] Steinberg and Almeida

found that: "challenge, not remediation, makes the most difference for those young people who

are least likely to graduate from high school and attend college, and for whom society has had

low aspirations for academic achievement or attainment."[55] Indeed, students in Olsen's study

reported that the alternative program was "much more challenging and rewarding than the

traditional high school" and that they now "had higher expectations that included college

enrollment."[56] Alternative programs have the capacity to empower discouraged students to re-

evaluate their academic potential by helping them rise to heightened expectations.

General program flexibility proves to be another important component of successful

alternative models. Morrissette described flexibility on an interpersonal level, in terms of the

teacher's ability to switch from academic to personal subjects when talking with students.

Participants in his study found that the ability to talk through emotional stressors with teachers

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[53] Lynette Olsen, "Aztec Middle College," 672.

[54] Adria Steinberg and Cheryl A. Almeida, "Expanding the Pathway to Postsecondary Success: How Recuperative Back-on-Track Schools Are Making a Difference." *New Directions for Youth Development* no. 127 (January 1, 2010): 94.

[55] Adria Steinberg and Cheryl A. Almeida, "Expanding the Pathway to Postsecondary Success," 94.

[56] Lynette Olsen, "Aztec Middle College," 672-673.

helped them regain focus regarding their studies.[57] Curriculum flexibility is also important to

foster each student's unique learning style. Concretely, the Indiana Department of Education

(IDOE) recommends self-paced, project-based learning that cultivates critical thinking, and

portfolio-style assessments that can be adapted to the individual strengths of each student.[58]

Finally, Gut et al. found that structural flexibility, such as college-style schedules or shortened

school days, helps students balance class time with responsibilities they face outside school.[59]

This flexibility can alleviate stressors for teen parents, students facing other familial

responsibilities, and students for whom employment is a necessity. Morrissette warns that

flexibility must be paired with clear goals and guidelines to keep students on track, but maintains

that the flexibility to adapt to students' needs and strengths is crucial to the success of alternative

programs.[60]

  While it may be hard to pinpoint a specific model that is especially effective, it is clear

that there are certain characteristics that make alternative programs especially beneficial for at

risk populations. Most important of all is creating a safe, supportive learning environment by

promoting respectful and personal relationships between teachers and students.[61] When students

understand that their teachers are legitimately invested in their success both in and out of the

classroom, they feel more comfortable employing teachers as resources to further their

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[57] Patrick John Morrissette, "Exploring Student Experiences," 181.

[58] Kelly E. Cable et al., "Alternative Schools: What's in a Name?" *Education Policy Brief* 7, no. 4, (Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, Indiana University: January 1, 2009), 8.

[59] Eva Gut and John M. McLaughlin, "Alternative Education's Impact on Office Disciplinary Referrals," *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas* 85, no. 6 (2012): 232; Adria Steinberg and Cheryl A. Almeida, "Expanding the Pathway to Postsecondary Success," 95.

[60] Patrick John Morrissette, "Exploring Student Experiences," 181-182.

[61] Patrick John Morrissette, "Exploring Student Experiences," 177.

education.[62] Rigorous, yet flexible programs seem to be most effective, and give students a chance to empower themselves by rising to new and higher expectations.[63] Just as inadequate social support was identified as a major barrier to high school completion, success for alternative models seems to hinge on the power of interpersonal relationships to support discouraged students to stay engaged academically.

This raises the issue of defining "success" and "effectiveness" for alternative programs. As Lange and Sletten point out, while increased educational achievement may be the ultimate goal of these programs, narrowing the definition of efficacy to only include academic improvement, "may negate the positive outcomes that have emerged in the areas of increased satisfaction, self-esteem and connection to school – those outcomes that may ultimately keep students in school."[64] These factors are best measured through student experiences, not standardized testing, and are therefore harder to collect and compare across programs. When evaluating programs solely based on academic progress, it is important to remember that this is only one facet of success.

Even when only looking at graduation, retention, and college matriculation rates, the paucity of studies and school records makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the academic efficacy of alternative programs. One well-researched model is the Middle College High School (MCHS). These programs take place on college campuses and have reported both high graduation and college matriculation rates. Olsen found MCHS's with program graduation rates

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[62] Lynette Olsen, "Aztec Middle College," 672-673.

[63] Adria Steinberg, and Cheryl A. Almeida. "Expanding the Pathway to Postsecondary Success," 94.

[64] Cheryl M Lange, and Sandra J. Sletten. "Alternative education," 22.

ranging from 65 to 95 percent.[65] These same programs reported 75 percent-80 percent of students enrolling in college after graduation. The high college matriculation rates among MCHS graduates supports the idea, posed by several scholars, that hosting alternative programs on college campuses eases the transition into higher education. The promising trend in increased post-secondary enrollment among student populations that struggled to graduate high school emphasizes the importance of further research into the best practices for alternative programs, as well as into the transition from alternative programs to higher education. Our research analyzes student perspectives to evaluate the potential for college-campus alternative programs to alleviate barriers to graduation and increase college matriculation.

Research Methods

In light of our understanding of prior scholarship on the discrepancy in dropout rates between minority groups and their white counterparts, we focused our research on the question: "How effective are alternative education programs at meeting the needs of discouraged learners, and increasing college matriculation rates, especially among Latinos and other students of color?" The implications of our findings regarding discouraged learners and the effectiveness of alternative education models are relevant and significant because of the paucity of research in these areas. Two other questions framing our research are: "What circumstances, academic or otherwise, create discouraged learners?" and: "What can a case study of student experiences from the Alternative Education Program (AEP), located at the Walla Walla Community College (WWCC), tell us about the potential for alternative education to benefit discouraged learners?"

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[65] Lynette Olsen, "Aztec Middle College," 668.

Our participants were exclusively Latino students, in order to understand the racial disparities in dropout rates through minority student perspectives.

In our case study, we conducted twenty-two interviews of both graduated and current students in the fall of 2013. Our community partners, AEP instructor, Brian Gabbard and High School Programs Director, Kim Cassetto, aided us in the recruitment process and provided input on the formulation of our interview questions. We asked our participants to discuss both the factors that caused them to drop out of mainstream high school, and to evaluate their experience with the AEP. All interviews took place in a vacant classroom on the WWCC campus for the convenience, comfort and confidentiality of our participants. These interviews were semi-structured, guided by questions that revolved around barriers to graduation such as: (a) lack of social support (b) homelessness (c) behavioral problems (d) gang involvement (e) teen pregnancy, and (f) undocumented status. As demonstrated by prior scholarship, these factors indicate a high risk of high school non-completion. In our interviews we asked how the AEP helped alleviate problems that students faced both inside and outside the classroom, and how effective they found the post-graduation preparation services available through the program. Although each interview was guided by questions that focused on the issues of greatest concern to our research and our partner organization, we also encouraged our participants to steer the discussion towards issues of personal importance to them.

Participants were invited to participate, not only to further our own research, but also to have an opportunity to offer critical feedback based on their experiences, and realize their potential to effect change. We acknowledged the sensitive nature of many of our interview topics, and made sure each co-researcher understood the voluntary nature of their participation,

and their right to total anonymity. We collected informed consent forms before each interview, and verbally reiterated the purpose of our research as well as their rights as participants. Our report uses pseudonyms to protect the identity of the individual.

In a follow-up focus group, after the initial one on one interviews, we also sought specific criticisms of the AEP model. Our original interviews yielded overwhelmingly positive reviews of the program, so we returned to ask students to elaborate on how the program could be improved, especially in terms of the transition from AEP graduation to enrollment in higher education. We worked with our partners at AEP to set up a three-hour drop-in session, where all previous participants were invited to participate as their schedules allowed. We transcribed all interviews and focus groups verbatim, and developed a coding system to identify major themes in each transcript. The themes that emerged most strongly in the course of this process form the basis of our analysis in the next section of this report.

In order to understand these themes in the context of AEP specifically, we requested information on the structural particularities of this program. We developed for a thorough description of the program's history, mission, and relationship with the Community College, as well as staffing, operational, and funding specifics. These important structural factors clarify the ways in which the AEP model is able to address the individual needs of their students, and effectively work to reduce dropout rates and increase postsecondary enrollment.

Part I: Circumstances That Create Discouraged Learners

Our research examines the individual and societal forces that affect a student's decision to drop out of high school. In addition, we evaluate the efficacy of the Alternative Education

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Program (AEP) as an alternative to mainstream education for these discouraged learners. This report uses the term "discouraged learner," a term borrowed from our partners at AEP, instead of contentious alternatives, such as "at-risk student" or "dropout." "Discouraged learner" alleviates the negative stereotype of the apathetic dropout, at the same time recognizing the student as an active agent who has been affected by both internal and external factors. Using the Alternative Education Program in the Walla Walla Community College (WWCC) as a case study for our research, we interviewed students and alumni in order to learn from their firsthand experiences and insights. In particular, we investigated how this program meets the needs of discouraged learners and how this correlates to increased graduation and college matriculation rates, especially among minority groups, and particularly Latinos. When asked about obstacles they faced on their path to graduation, interviewees most frequently reported the following: an unstable home life, gang affiliation, undocumented status, substance abuse, teen parenthood, unequal treatment in the classroom, and behavioral problems. These barriers affect students both mentally and emotionally; they can interfere with a students' ability to focus on school, or decrease their motivation to invest in their education at all. Alternative Education programs can provide substantial support to diverse groups of students whose needs are not successfully met by the public school. In Part II of our primary research analysis we discuss the specifics of the AEP itself and the ways it and other alternative education programs can help these students succeed, but first we further investigate the factors and circumstances that lead them to become discouraged learners.

The mission of AEP is "to offer students an opportunity to complete their high school goals, while respecting the variety of experiences and paths each individual brings to this

completion process." [66] These individual paths and experiences form a diverse and relatively fluid student population. While most of this report focuses on student experiences, a statistical snapshot of AEP students provides important background information. In 2013, 58 percent of the students were Caucasian, 37 percent were Hispanic/Latino, and 5 percent were Asian, Native American, African American, or of other ethnic origins. A staggering 81 percent of AEP students are first generation or low income.[67] Many of the students, approximately 74 percent, are seniors or fifth-year seniors, and 97 percent are credit deficient by more than 1.5 credits.[68] The experiences brought to AEP by each individual often include difficult circumstances that were barriers to graduation. In 2013, 16 percent of students reported they were pregnant, or are teen parents, and 32 percent of AEP students reported being homeless, self-supporters, or couch surfers.[69] As previous scholarship established, these circumstances can function as barriers to high school completion. These discouraged learners come to AEP from a variety of paths, but are all seeking the same goal: to complete high school and have the opportunity to attend college.

The high correlation between teen parenthood and high school non-completion may say more about society's treatment of teen parents than it does about the effects of parenthood itself. It is true that teen parents are statistically more likely to drop out of high school than their non-parenting classmates, and it is undeniable that teen parenthood is fraught with new challenges for the young parent.[70] Morning sickness interferes with early start times, and teen parents

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[66] Kim Cassetto, "2009-2013 Alternative Education Program (AEP) Trends," September 30, 2013.

[67] Kim Cassetto, "2009-2013 AEP Trends."

[68] Kim Cassetto, "2009-2013 AEP Trends."

[69] Kim Cassetto, "2009-2013 AEP Trends."

[70] Dave E. Marcotte, "High school dropout and teen childbearing," *Economics of Education Review* 34 (2013).

complained that full day class schedules made it impossible to fulfill their responsibilities to their children. [71] However, inflexible school schedules and a paucity of resources for teen parents do nothing to alleviate these stressors and help these students graduate. Christina Hamilton, current student at AEP, voices the frustration and helplessness that many teen mothers experience when faced with a lack of resources: "They just sit there and say: you're not [going to] make it because you have a kid. Oh really? OK, well, do something about it… help us out, we want to help ourselves."[72] Once pregnant, many teen parents feel dismissed by mainstream education as inevitable failures. Such feelings also reflect a broader trend in which mainstream schools respond ineffectively to students who differ from the vision of what it means to be normal.

Interestingly enough, many teen parents reported a stronger sense of responsibility, an understanding of the importance of education, and increased long-term thinking as a result of parenthood.[73] All of these factors signaled improved educational attainment, and indeed these young parents enjoyed their experience in the Alternative Education Program, at the time of interviewing. Our research shows that parenthood itself does not create discouraged learners, and that young parents are very motivated to succeed academically if they can find a flexible learning environment that supports students ambitions and fosters their own growth. However, it is easy to see how the stress of parenthood, exacerbated by an inflexible school system that almost assumes their non-completion, can lead students to fulfill the stereotype of the teen parent

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[71] Daria Gonzalez, interview by A. Berg, November 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA. All further references to Gonzalez refer to this interview; Christina Hamilton, interview by A. Berg, October 30, 2013, Walla Walla, WA. All further references to Hamilton refer to this interview.

[72] Hamilton (2013).

[73] Randy Morales, interview by A. Berg, November 18, 2013, Walla Walla, WA. All further references to Morales refer to this interview; Hamilton (2013).

dropout.

Even students who do not have children of their own can be called upon to take on adult responsibilities in the home, including raising siblings. Especially in single parent homes, familial duties can take precedence over other obligations, including schoolwork. AEP student Rosa Leon explains how her studies were pushed to the side because of the need to take care of her siblings, especially her mentally disabled brother:

> I've been taking care of him ever since he was born. I have to pick him up from the bus and pick up my other brother from the bus so I really have to rush right after CC, go home and pick them up. And sometimes I feel like I need to stay at CC cause I want to go to the tutoring learning center to get help or I need to use Wi-Fi or talk to my teachers and sometimes I can't, so that's affecting me now and that's affected me all throughout high school, taking care of my brothers and changing his diapers and everything cause my parents [had] to work so much. [74]

Leon is not able to excel academically because her family priorities take up the majority of her energy and time. Also visible from Leon's testimony is her increased reliance on school resources, like Wi-Fi, which her family is unable to afford. Leon's experience demonstrates the burden that financial instability can put on single-parent homes, where parents often take on extra shifts or work multiple jobs just to provide the essentials for their family. As in Leon's case, this can increase the weight of responsibility placed on older siblings, and make it more difficult for parents to invest time in their children's lives. This is only to the detriment of their education, as prior scholarship stresses the positive relationship between parental involvement and higher

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[74] Rosa Leon, interview by L. Rodriguez, November 9, 2013, Walla Walla, WA. All further references to Leon refer to this interview.

student achievement.[75]

Homelessness affects a staggering 30 percent of the AEP student body, and for this reason alone it is important to include in our research.[76] As stated in our scholarly research, we define homelessness according to Hendricks and Barkley's definition of residential instability. [77] our Furthermore, we found that homelessness was often a result of other barriers we examined, such as substance abuse, undocumented status, and an unstable home life.[78] Prior scholarship has established that homeless youth are more likely to miss school and fall behind than other low-income students, and our research at AEP was consistent with this claim.[79] Aracely Barron became homeless after an argument with her grandmother, and found it impossible to pass her classes while she "couch surfed" at various friends' houses. She finally settled in with one close friend, but struggled to motivate herself to attend classes with no parental figure pressuring her to do so.[80] This prolonged instability and lack of parental oversight would eventually lead homeless students to fall so far behind that they lose hope of ever graduating. Be they academic or behavioral, problems in the classroom frequently stem from a lack of stability support at home, and this is clearly the case with homeless youth.

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[75] Gary G. Aspiazu, Scott C. Bauer, and Mary Dee Spillett, "Improving the Academic Performance of Hispanic Youth: A Community Education Model," *Bilingual Research Journal* 22, no. 2–4 (Spring 1998).

[76] Kim Cassetto, "2009-2013 AEP Trends."

[77] Hendricks et al., "The Academic Effect of Homelessness."

[78] Freddie Pacheco, interview by A. Berg, October 29, 2013, Walla Walla, WA. All further references to Pacheco refer to this interview; Morales (2013); Aracely Barron, interview by L. Rodriguez, November 18, 2013, Walla Walla, WA. All further references to Barron refer to this interview

[79] J.C. Buckner, "Understanding the impact of homelessness on children: Challenges and future research directions," *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51 (2008).

[80] Barron (2013).

Lack of support from parents or other important role models can cause teens to seek alternative support systems. Becoming a member of a gang is a tempting path, and sometimes the only recourse for teens seeking refuge outside the home. AEP graduate Freddie Pacheco describes the situation he found himself in as he contemplated joining a gang: "I was by myself. You know, my parents left [to Mexico permanently] and I had so much pain and anger... And that's the way I decided to go." [81] Pacheco's loneliness and emotional instability made him especially susceptible to gangs. He substituted the social support he lacked from his family with the deep connection he developed to his gang. Pacheco's affiliated peer group further influenced his decision to join: "I want[ed] to fit in with the rest of the crowd, I [didn't] want to be the outsider."[82] The pressures of being a young adult and the desire to feel accepted were made even worse by the vulnerable position he found himself in after his parents' faced deportation. Like any other high school student, Pacheco felt pressure to belong to a particular social group; unfortunately, his gang encouraged his disengagement from academics and the rest of the high school community.

Once affiliated, teens are immersed in a culture where peers and role models reinforce destructive behavior such as substance abuse and crime. Scholars Romo and Falbo stress the importance of peer and mentor relationships in youth decision making, and especially decisions concerning their education.[83] Without parental supervision, or a positive role model to counterbalance the influence of the gang, substances soon took priority over education for

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[81] Pacheco (2013).

[82] Pacheco (2013).

[83] Harriett D. Romo and Toni Falbo, "Latino high school graduation," 211.

several interviewees.[84] Jose Garza recalls his introduction to drug culture: "I am a gang member, affiliated, so drugs came really easy to me. First I did drugs around people who were doing it and it got passed to me. I was age 8 when I smoked marijuana for the first time and then I started doing other drugs as time went by."[85] For other students in the AEP, like Randy Morales, substance abuse became a daily routine. Morales reported smoking marijuana at Walla Walla High School, "every opportunity [he] had" without regard for the effect it had on his ability to retain information in class.[86] However, when he came to AEP, where he found the classes more interesting, he, "slowly stopped [smoking marijuana] and started coming to class sober so [he] could actually pay attention."[87] Within gang culture, the more immediately relevant street education is emphasized over formal education, and affiliated teens see no use for subjects like history and math.[88] The combination of a peer group that prioritizes drug use, and a lack of interest in the material taught in the classroom, results in an accelerated disengagement from academics.

For many participants in our research, their undocumented status was the biggest source of discouragement when it came to education. Since they are ineligible for federal scholarships, and because most undocumented families already suffer from degrees of financial instability,

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[84] Morales (2013); Jose Garza, interview by B. Zarate, October 9, 2013, Walla Walla, WA. All further references to Garza refer to this interview; Daniel Beleche, interview by B. Zarate, November 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA. All further references to Beleche refer to this interview.

[85] Garza (2013).

[86] Morales (2013).

[87] Morales (2013).

[88] Pacheco (2013); Morales (2013).;Gonzalo Martinez, interview by Andrea Berg, November 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA. All further references to Martinez refer to this interview.

college is not an option for many undocumented students.[89] Rosa Leon describes the frustration she felt as graduation neared:

> Within the past two years in high school I would see my friends applying for scholarships or to the schools they wanted to attend. [I'd think:] "I can't apply to any of these schools; I don't have [a] Social Security Number; I can't apply so why even try."And I guess that was my attitude back then…that was one of the reasons [why] I didn't care.[90]

After receiving the same high school education as her peers, Leon saw her own options drastically limited for no other reason than her undocumented status. Even in high school, working to earn gas money, Leon's undocumented status limited her employment options to agricultural work. The realization that even with a college degree this might be the only employment available to her only discouraged her further. This sense of hopelessness and resentment came up often in our interviews with undocumented students.[91] Many saw no reason to invest in their education when it became clear that it would do nothing to improve their future options.

When students feel that the school system prioritizes the success of other students over their own, they can become disillusioned with education altogether. Unequal treatment in the classroom left many interviewees feeling as though their teachers prioritized athletes and straight-A students over those who were struggling.[92] Students who are already integrated and

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[89] William Pérez et al., "Cursed and blessed" 38.

[90] Leon (2013).

[91] Pacheco (2013); Beleche (2013).

[92] Morales (2013).

successful in their school community often receive the most attention from teachers, and this undercurrent of unfairness can prompt students who feel ignored to disengage from the academic environment completely. Randy Morales recalls the incident that caused him to drop out of school: "They started putting the athlete students first, and if they fell behind they started extending their tests, and it just, it wasn't fair. So I stopped going."[93] Imagine Morales' frustration at this preferential treatment as his own requests for extra help went unnoticed. These students feel, perhaps justly, that the mainstream public school system does not deserve their time or attention, precisely because neither time nor attention is devoted to them.

Several interviewees also felt that they were directly disadvantaged because of their race.[94] Morales and his fellow classmates of color were routinely ignored by their science teacher. However, when Randy accused him of racist teaching practices, it was Morales who was expelled from the classroom.[95] Leon remembers feeling similarly ignored by her math teacher, "He would never actually help me so I just gave up asking him... [He] was really racist, he had a lot of preference towards his white students and would joke around with them and would help them out, but when it came to, like, Hispanic, or color and stuff like that, he wouldn't really bother to help. So because of that I struggled a lot." [96] Leon's testimony illustrates how racial discrimination in the classroom can have direct negative effects on the academic success of students of color. Not only did she not learn the material, but she gave up asking questions as she

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[93] Morales (2013).

[94] Morales (2013); Leon (2013).

[95] Morales (2013).

[96] Leon (2013); Iliana Andrade, interview by B. Zarate, October 9, 2013, Walla Walla, WA. All further references to Andrade refer to this interview.

realized the futility of her efforts. Viewed in tandem with disparities in drop out rates between racial demographics, the experiences of these students suggest that the standard school system spends the most time on the students who need it the least.

Behavioral problems in the classroom often occur as a direct response to discriminatory teaching practices. If students feel that teachers have done nothing to earn their respect, they behave accordingly in the classroom. Several students also expressed frustration at the fact that teachers didn't take the time to understand the issues they were facing outside of class that might be triggering their bad behavior. [97] Morales, who struggled with anger management, was often punished with detention or suspension, instead of being referred to counseling services.[98] When students feel disrespected and misunderstood by their teachers, the result is a toxic learning environment. Additionally, teachers come to be seen as frightening authority figures, instead of positive mentors that students can look to for help. An overwhelming percentage of our participants reported skipping class altogether, either to avoid confrontations with teachers or because they saw no benefit to attending class.[99] Our interviews demonstrated that solving behavioral problems with punishment, and ignoring the root causes of the misbehavior, does nothing to motivate students to improve classroom conduct.[100] This approach can also sour teacher-student relationships, making education even less appealing to already struggling students.

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[97] Gonalo (2013); Morales (2013).

[98] Morales (2013).

[99] Morales (2013).; Samuel Rivaz, interview by L. Rodriguez, November 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA. All further references to Rivas refer to this interview; Martinez (2013).

[100] Martinez (2013); Beleche (2013).

Overall, our interviews of discouraged learners shed light on a process of disengagement fueled by both individual and environmental factors. Overwhelming, these students lacked a stable family support system or positive adult mentors to influence their decisions and encourage their education. The scope of our research did not include an evaluation of mainstream education, however, our interviewees reported that these schools did little to adapt to their particular needs, and in some cases exacerbated the cycle of discouragement from within the classroom. Our research found that these students saw no reason to invest in their education, either because they did not see the relevance of a classroom education, or because they felt as though they were expected to fail. Keeping in mind that our research reflects only the experiences of a small group of students, these student experiences are informative and form a valid foundation for conclusions about the potential for alternative education programs to benefit discouraged learners; we do not attempt to represent the state of mainstream education.

Part II: Student Perceptions of the Benefits of Alternative Education

Public alternative education programs have the potential to motivate students who became discouraged in an apathetic standard mainstream school system. In our study of the AEP, interviewees also offered their perspectives on the effectiveness of this particular program. Conclusions drawn from our study of AEP show the potential for this and other alternative education programs to reach students who have been discouraged in the mainstream education system, so traditional education can more adequately fulfill its role as a vehicle of equal opportunity.

The AEP is partnered with and hosted by the Walla Walla Community College (WWCC.)

According to their official mission statement, "The Alternative Education Program exists to offer students an opportunity to complete their high school goals, while respecting the variety of experiences and paths each individual brings to this completion process."[101] Students must be officially referred by a school administrator, or have already removed themselves from their previous school in order to enroll at AEP, but matriculation is free and happens on a rolling basis.[102] Like other traditional schools, the AEP program is state funded, with money allocated through the Walla Walla School District based on the students' full-time or part-time enrollment. In addition to free tuition, the program also supplies students with course textbooks at no cost. AEP offers high school level classes as well as transitional pre-college courses and the opportunity to enroll in WWCC courses depending on individual student ability, which is determined through placement tests. There are also vocational programs available to AEP students through the Community College, such as nursing assistant and automotive repair training. Most AEP and WWCC classes meet five days a week for five credits per quarter, and a typical course load is three to five classes. This means less class time for students than mainstream high school, but much more than other contract-style alternative programs. This schedule style provides students with the most flexibility, both in course content and class time, to accommodate their academic goals and non-academic responsibilities. AEP staffs one program director and three instructors, all of whom double as student advisors. Advising sessions are mandatory at the beginning of each quarterly registration period. By juxtaposing these structural aspects of AEP with student experiences, this report seeks to understand the characteristics of the

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[101] Kim Cassetto, "2009-2013 AEP Trends."

[102] Brian Gabbard, email to authors, March 6, 2014. All other information regarding the structural aspects of the AEP refers to this email correspondence.

program that most inspire and facilitate student success.

Prior scholarship demonstrates the importance of a strong teacher student dynamic, so our research focuses heavily on the various facets of this relationship. Morrissette goes so far as to argue that interpersonal relationships and a supportive learning environment are more important to learning than course content.[103] When teachers express interest in their academic success as well as their hobbies, their families, and their personal struggles, students feel respected not only as learners but also as people. Randy Morales explains how the authentic interest his teachers at AEP expressed in his well-being motivated him to give education a second chance: "If [they're] actually willing to teach me and [they're] actually willing to show that [they] care and [they] want to know what happens in my future, I'm willing to come to school, I'm willing to learn."[104] Morales's sentiments reflect the advantages of a student-teacher relationship based on mutual respect. This genuine interest in the success of their students also makes teachers more approachable when students are struggling academically.[105]

Many students became accustomed to their requests for extra help being either completely ignored or met with reproach in the high school classrooms, so they stopped asking questions. In order to foster a healthy, supportive learning environment, AEP staff work individually with students to answer their questions and accommodate their various learning styles. Graduate of the program, Freddie Pacheco, appreciated the fact that teachers at AEP take the extra time to make sure their students fully comprehend the material:

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[103] Patrick John Morrissette, "Exploring Student Experiences," 185.

[104] Morales (2013).

[105] Lily Navarro, interview by B. Zarate, October 9, 2013, Walla Walla, WA. All further references to Navarro refer to this interview; Adrian Gomez, interview by L. Rodriguez, October 30, 2013, Walla Walla, WA. All further references to Gomez refer to this interview

It's… easier, it's a lot more understanding [sic], you can actually sit down one on one

with teachers if you don't understand it. After class, you can talk to them, you know, it's

not like normal high school…teachers throwing things at you and they just want to get

the period over with, you know? … But here they are actually [going to] take time, talk to

you…I don't know, teachers care. [106]

The vast majority of students shared Pacheco's sentiments and experienced greater academic

success as a result of the AEP staff's dedication to their students. When there is a foundation of

trust and understanding between student and instructor, not only does the student feel

comfortable asking for assistance, but the teachers are able to provide individualized help in a

respectful and constructive way.

These teacher-student relationships are not a side-effect of extraordinarily friendly

instructors, but an intentional, structural aspect of the AEP model. AEP instructors double as

advisors, and frequent, mandatory advising meetings gives staff the opportunity to know students

both in and out of the classroom.[107] Students meet with their designated AEP advisor 3 times a

year, prior to class registration. During these advising meetings, the student and instructor review

the academic achievements and improvements from their previous quarter to the current quarter,

and have an opportunity to discuss any personal stressors that may be affecting the student's

ability to realize academic success. In addition to these formal interactions, students and teachers

engage in frequent casual conversations. Because instructors only teach three courses per quarter,

they have open office hours when students can drop in, and do, for academic and personal

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[106] Pacheco (2013).

[107] Brian Gabbard, email to authors, March 6, 2014. All other information regarding advising sessions refers to this email.

advice. The structure of AEP class schedules and advising sessions facilitates strong relationships between teachers and students by intentionally creating space for both formal and casual interactions.

Flexible class schedules make it possible for students to balance their academic goals with their responsibilities outside the classroom. The AEP model operates on a college-style schedule that minimizes class time, and allow students to hold jobs, care for children, and tend to other obligations that might otherwise prevent them from attending class.[108] Linda Mendez, an AEP graduate and teen mother, required childcare services for her daughter during school. To meet Mendez's needs, AEP connected her to local resources for young mothers. She explains, "I talked to AEP and they were going to be able to be flexible with my schedule so I could come and see my daughter here while taking classes, so I could easily see her between my classes on campus at the daycare."[109] The AEP made sure Mendez could fulfill her responsibility as a parent while simultaneously earning her high school diploma. Mendez's story demonstrates how flexibility on the part of teachers and the program itself can mitigate the barriers affecting students' academic success.

For students who have internalized the low expectations of educators and family members alike, the exposure to adult mentors who believe in their ability to succeed is an empowering experience. Daria Gonzalez describes the internal transformation that occurred when teachers at AEP motivated her to re-evaluate her potential and prove herself academically:

From high school my intentions were just to have my son and finish school, and if I

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[108] Brian Gabbard, email to authors, March 6, 2014.

[109] Linda Mendez, interview by B. Zarate, November 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA All further references to Mendez refer to this interview.

didn't, oh well. As to when I came here [to AEP]... They made me want to prove, not just

to them, but to everyone, like: "I can do it!"... If they have inspiration in me, I should

have some inspiration in myself and get it done. With their motivation plus my family's,

it just kind of adds up and you're kind of sucking it up like this big ball of confident

success![110]

Other students at AEP corroborated Gonzalez's testimony to the importance of inspirational

teachers, as does past scholarship on alternative education programs. Steinberg and Almeida note

that creating an environment where students feel respected, supported, and capable of succeeding

can help students "rebuild their self-confidence and their identities as learners."[111] This renewal

of self-worth and personal potential is an essential first step in the transformation of a

discouraged learner into an active, engaged student.

The AEP model puts the onus of responsibility on the student, providing them with

opportunities to take ownership of their education and realize their agency as learners. Adrian

Gomez remembers being inspired to take responsibility for his education by AEP staff:

For me, being able to rely on myself to get things done is what actually motivated me to

do the AEP program. They would help you if you had questions, but they really weren't

on your case, you know, like Brian, he just first got in [and said:] "I'm here to teach, if

you don't want to learn the door is right there, I don't want you disturbing the class, you

gotta learn." Just the independence here I guess.[112]

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[110] Gonzalez (2013).

[111] Adria Steinberg and Cheryl A. Almeida. "Expanding the Pathway to Postsecondary Success," 95.

[112] Gomez (2013).

The increased level of responsibility at AEP gave Gomez an opportunity to feel in charge of his own life and make the choice to be successful by using the resources available at the AEP. Teachers and staff at AEP are always available to help, but with the expectation that students will take responsibility for their attendance and assignments. Attendance is mandatory, but not enforced by a school resource officer. The responsibility lies with the student to attend class, but attendance is monitored through a computer check-in system, and after 20 consecutive days of non-attendance, students are withdrawn from the program. While this sometimes leads to failure initially, most students learn to self-motivate and take responsibility for their academic success. This cultivation of personal responsibility is a critical part of the AEP model, and aims to prepare students for success beyond high school graduation.

Since the AEP is located on the WWCC campus, students are introduced to the collegiate environment and college-going role models. Rosa Leon believes that the college environment is vital to the success of the AEP "...because it's at the Community College, you almost feel like, yeah, I'm going to college, but you're really not... You're surrounded by adults and they treat you like an adult... if it wasn't located at CC, I don't think it would be such a successful program." [113] Many interviewees admitted that they never expected to pursue a higher education until they came to AEP, but were motivated by the adult students and academically-focused environment.[114] AEP also allows students to enroll in college classes at the CC, while simultaneously earning their high school diploma. This offers students who feel the AEP high school classes are too remedial to enroll in classes that fit their skill level, and allows them the

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[113] Leon (2013)..

[114] Hamilton (2013).; Gonzalez (2013).; Morales (2013).

opportunity to advance at their own pace.[115] Jose Garza was able to take college level math

classes and begin earning credits towards his Associates of Arts (AA) degree, which would

eventually allow him to graduate early.[116] Many students were surprised at their ability to

succeed at the college level when AEP staff encouraged them to take advantage of the dual

enrollment option and they went on to enroll full time at the Community College.

When asked about the long-term effects of AEP, students report having an improved self-

image and higher expectations for themselves. They feel confident in their ability to graduate,

and believe they have the skills necessary to succeed in the future, including in higher

education.[117] Graduate Faustina Guillen looked back at her transformation from high school to

AEP, noting the marked difference in her aspirations:

In high school I really didn't have many goals for myself...My goal really was just to

graduate...I never planned to come to college… honestly the program, I don't know what,

[it] just completely changed my mentality. I set goals for myself, I wanted to find my job,

I wanted to earn my own money, I wanted to learn what it was to become independent.[118]

This increased understanding of the relationship between education and future success, in terms

of both economic independence and career satisfaction, came up in several interviews.[119] Our

research shows that this translates into a concrete increase in college matriculation among AEP

[115] Carla Hernandez, focus group by A. Berg, L. Rodriguez, and B. Zarate, February 13, 2014, Walla Walla, WA.

[116] Garza (2013).

[117] Camila Carillo, interview by A. Berg, October 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA; Felipe Moreno, interview by A. Berg, October 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA; Christina Hamilton, interview by A. Berg, October 30, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.

[118] Faustina Guillen, interview by L. Rodriguez, November 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.

[119] Freddie Pacheco, interview by A. Berg, October 29, 2013, Walla Walla, WA; Gonzalo Martinez, interview by A. Berg, November 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA; Daria Gonzalez, interview by A. Berg, November 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.

graduates, the majority of whom were currently enrolled in college classes at the time of interviewing. Students credit the improvement in their long-term thinking and goal setting to the AEP staff who consistently supported their efforts and believed in their ability to succeed.

When pressed to offer criticisms of AEP, to counterbalance the overwhelmingly positive reviews, students admitted that they sometimes felt unprepared for life after graduation. They requested more concrete exercises in long-term planning and goal setting, as well as increased input from advisors regarding class selection. Carla Hernandez explained, "They could tell us what classes we need to take that would help us with the careers we're interested in, instead of saying that it's fine for us just to take drama classes and P.E. classes."[120] Other students echoed this desire, and also asked for a larger emphasis on post-graduation planning in their advising sessions. Four-Year Plans, they agreed, would help to keep students motivated towards graduation and aware of their academic progression.[121] Students also identified the mandatory Senior Capstone class as another area where they would benefit from more personalized long-term advising. While the class does offer general information on scholarships, college options, and job skills, students desired more individually-focused sessions that looked at their specific scholarship qualifications and pathways to their particular career aspirations.[122] Gonzalo Martinez, for example, took two years off to work before discovering that he qualified for scholarships that allowed him to enroll in Western Washington University, because he was

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[120] Carla Hernandez, focus group by A. Berg, L. Rodriguez, and B. Zarate, February 13, 2014, Walla Walla, WA.

[121] Focus group by A. Berg, L. Rodriguez, and B. Zarate, February 13, 2014, Walla Walla, WA. All other references to focus groups refer to this focus group.

[122] Focus group (2014).

unaware of the financial aid available to him.[123] Many students felt unprepared, even after completing the class, because, as they explained, the class was not taken seriously and the future importance of these skills was not emphasized. Overall, students felt had positive thoughts about their experience with AEP, but were able to identify ways that the program could be improved to smooth the transition from AEP graduation on to college or employment.

The student experiences that we collected highlight the potential for alternative programs, like AEP, to reach students who have been discouraged by the mainstream public school system. The flexibility of the program and the availability of individual attention makes the program successful for students with a wide variety of backgrounds and educational needs. The AEP model focuses on alleviating the barriers that keep discouraged learners from attaining their high school diplomas, and empowers students to take control of their education by emphasizing personal responsibility. The AEP case study shows the importance of providing alternatives to mainstream education for students who have become disillusioned with their academic potential.

Action Recommendations and Conclusion

We set out to evaluate the potential for alternative education programs like AEP to increase high school graduation and matriculation rates among Latinos, specifically by asking:

- What circumstances, academic or otherwise, create discouraged learners?

- What can we learn from student experiences about the best practices for alternative programs?

- How well does an experience in alternative education prepare students for life beyond

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[123] Martinez (2013).

high school?

Our case study of the Alternative Education Program in the Walla Walla Community College demonstrates the program's ability to empower discouraged learners to earn a high school diploma and pursue higher education. As previously stated in our primary research, many of these students face obstacles that affect their ability to succeed in mainstream schools. These barriers, which include homelessness, behavioral problems, gang affiliation, teen pregnancy, and undocumented status, are often either exacerbated by, or the result of, low socioeconomic status. AEP directly addresses these needs through its emphasis on teacher-student relationships, program flexibility, and the cultivation of personal responsibility. AEP not only inspires students to set higher goals for themselves, but also equips them with the skills necessary to realize these goals. Other studies echo our promising findings regarding the success of alternative programs in re-engaging discouraged learners and making concrete progress addressing the dropout problem. Regardless of the obvious limitations to an eight-month case study of a specific alternative program, we feel confident in our conclusions and our ability to make recommendations from the local to the state level.

Every individual has a stake in improving access to quality education for all students. Communities directly benefit from a better-educated population, and efforts must be made locally to meet the needs of specific student populations. Our research shows that alternative programs can play an important role in this endeavor. The Walla Walla School Board, and school boards nationwide, should collaborate with alternative programs, viewing them as colleagues in a community effort to decrease local dropout rates. Schools should strive for increased communication between alternative and mainstream options so that student placement is based

on the best interests of the student, without being influenced by intra-district competition for state funding. We also recommend that the school board invite student participation in their meetings, and that students form committees to bring relevant comments and concerns about their education to the school board's attention. Our research showcases the power and insight of honest, critical student feedback regarding their educational experiences.

Despite the overwhelmingly positive student reviews of the AEP program, they identified several specific aspects of the program that could be adjusted to their benefit. From their feedback we recommend that AEP provide students with academic planners and a four-year-plan worksheet to help them organize both their short-term and long-term academic goals. We also recommend increased advisor input on the classes that would best advance them toward their goals. Other efforts to increase long-term planning and post-graduation preparedness should be addressed in the Senior Capstone course. Students expressed a desire for individual advising sessions to supplement this course, as they were unaware of their personal scholarship needs and qualifications. While students found the current curriculum informative, they requested increased exposure to skill-developing resources like networking workshops, job fairs, mock interviews, and tax return tutorials that could benefit students in the future. By increasing access to long-term planning and skill building resources, AEP can better prepare students for success within the program and beyond.

During our interviews, students were enthusiastic and highly appreciative of an opportunity to share their comments and concerns about the AEP. We recommend that more programs take student perspectives into account through student course evaluations, and through open dialog with both current and graduated students. During our focus group, some graduated

students expressed remorse that they had not taken more advantage of the opportunities provided to them through AEP. These alumni expressed a desire to return to AEP and share their experiences with current students, so that future generations could maximize the benefits of their AEP experience. We believe that alumni presentations and quarterly student evaluations would empower students to take ownership of their education. Overall, alternative programs can concretely benefit and constantly improve by creating a space for this dialog.

Both our primary and secondary research suggests a promising trend in college matriculation rates for alternative programs located on college campuses. We recommend that more communities take advantage of local colleges as collaborators in the effort to boost educational attainment. As a host and partner, community colleges can support the efforts of alternative schools and ease the transition from high school to college. Students at AEP reported being benefited by the collegiate environment, but expressed a desire for more access to, and knowledge of, resources available through the WWCC. By partnering closely with a college, alternative programs can provide a wider range of resources and supports for students without taking on extra costs or staff. Resources that exist already through colleges, such as tutoring centers, computer labs, scholarship information, counselors, and job skills training can be shared to benefit both the college and high school population. Even though each community's needs and resources are unique, the success of AEP and other alternative programs located on college campuses suggests that communities nationwide can benefit from adapting this model.

On the statewide level, the primary goal should be to provide a quality education for the entire youth population. Washington State made a commitment, in Supreme Court case *McCleary et al. v. State of Washington*, to provide sufficient funding for education before

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funding any other state programs. Other states should follow Washington's example by prioritizing mainstream education as the state's most important social program. However, flooding funding into existing schools does not address those students whose learning styles and particular needs are not supported in mainstream classrooms, and does nothing for students who have already dropped out. States must be willing to experiment with new models, and fund a system of educational options that reaches these currently disadvantaged populations. Additionally, states should alter their school funding policies to reduce competition for student enrollment between mainstream and alternative options, who now see state funding as a zero-sum game. To effectively and efficiently implement alternative options, more research must be done on the barriers to graduation facing modern American high school students, and the programs that can best mitigate these barriers and promote educational attainment. Scholarly research should be funded on both the state and federal level, however we believe existing alternative programs have the capacity to develop their own network of knowledge by increasing communication between schools. The ability to share what works and what doesn't across programs and states would allow alternative programs to improve dynamically and collaboratively. By providing pathways for discouraged learners to pursue their education, states can increase opportunities for social mobility that begin to address larger social inequalities.

Appendix of Interviews

Carla Hernandez, interview by L. Rodriguez, October 7, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Lily Navarro, interview by B. Zarate, October 9, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Jose Garza, interview by B. Zarate, October 9, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Camila Carillo, interview by A. Berg, October 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Felipe Moreno, interview by A. Berg, October 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.

Freddie Pacheco, interview by A. Berg, October 29, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Christina Hamilton, interview by A. Berg, October 30, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Adrian Gomez, interview by L. Rodriguez, October 30, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Eric Sandoval, interview by B. Zarate, October 30, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Fatima Coronado, interview by L. Rodriguez, November 4, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Iliana Andrade, interview by B. Zarate, November 6, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Rosa Leon, interview by L. Rodriguez, November 9, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Aracely Barron, interview by L. Rodriguez, November 18, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Randy Morales, interview by A. Berg, November 18, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Miguel Orozco, interview by B. Zarate, November 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Daria Gonzalez, interview by A. Berg, November 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Faustina Guillen, interview by L. Rodriguez, November 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA
Linda Mendez, interview by B. Zarate, November 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Samuel Rivaz, interview by L. Rodriguez, November 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Daniel Beleche, interview by B. Zarate, November 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Gonzalo Martinez, interview by Andrea Berg, November 20, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Emanuel De La Cruz, interview by L. Rodriguez, November 22, 2013, Walla Walla, WA.
Focus group of nine students, by A. Berg, L. Rodriguez, and B. Zarate, February 13, 2014, Walla Walla, WA.

This report uses pseudonyms, in accordance with our informed consent process, to protect the identity of the participants.

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