



Building Social Capital | Mini Case Study

Tacoma

“At [one field trip], there were more people who looked like them, right, because it's a very diverse school. And there were people from different backgrounds working [there], and who even live in Tacoma, versus the [other field] trip where there was no one that looked like [the students], except for one person who had a similar story to them. And that's something that one of the students expressed, that the only person they related to was the woman who came from a hard background, you know, versus the other ones who they weren't able to connect with.”

— Tacoma team, on the importance of representation in helping students make connections to new people and career opportunities

The Context

The work in Tacoma was led by the Foundation for Tacoma Students (FFTS) and the College Success Foundation (CSF), a national nonprofit organization and partnership between Tacoma Public Schools, Tacoma city government, colleges and community organizations to help widen access to college for low-income students attending Tacoma public schools. Together, the organizations developed a pilot for 9th and 10th graders at Lincoln High School that leveraged CSF's Knowledge Framework, specifically focused on career development. The afterschool program was led by the 9th and 10th grade coordinator, who hosted workshops and connected students to other learning opportunities.

The Learning

- **Center student interests and needs to build buy-in**

Most students have spent some time thinking about the kinds of jobs they see themselves in. However, they may have yet to consider what it takes to reach their career aspirations. The Tacoma team spent the first few weeks of their pilot getting to know students and introducing them to many of the tools at their disposal, including the High School and Beyond Plan (a requirement in the state of Washington). Starting with students' goals and taking stock of what they already know (or don't) can be a good starting point for helping them think through how their network can help them get to where they want to be.

- **Prepare the adults for meaningfully engaging with students**

Students who participated in the program had the opportunity to attend several career exploration field trips, and the team walked away with reflections about what made some experiences more impactful than others. A big lesson learned was the importance of ensuring that the adults engaging directly with students are prepared to meet them where they are. Though a setting may seem impressive or exciting, without the corresponding engagement strategy, students may lose interest or feel like they don't belong at the work site. During a more successful field trip, the employees seemed to be better prepared to connect with students and better reflected students' backgrounds and experiences.

- **Look to existing frameworks to build out a strategy**

The best way to ensure that social capital development becomes a sustainable and accessible feature of an organization's work is to align it with existing frameworks rather than think of it as a separate program. College Success Foundation offers its school-based staff a great deal of agency and flexibility in deciding how they program (and with what tools and materials) but provides a common framework to guide the work. In the initial review of the framework, it was clear to the team that social capital strategies were easily aligned with several framework components and could serve to strengthen the work rather than add to it.

- **Encourage staff to strengthen their own social capital**

While it is important to provide support to students to build and mobilize their own networks, it is also valuable for student-facing staff to see themselves as potential relationship brokers. This includes connecting with educators and administrators within the school building and looking outside the school community to bring new connections to students. The CSF advisor at Lincoln High School made it a priority to strengthen her own ties to teachers and staff in the building to better serve as a resource to them and to the students. As a result of these efforts, several teachers invited her into their classrooms to deliver quick presentations on the work of the College Success Foundation and how they could benefit from participation in their programming.