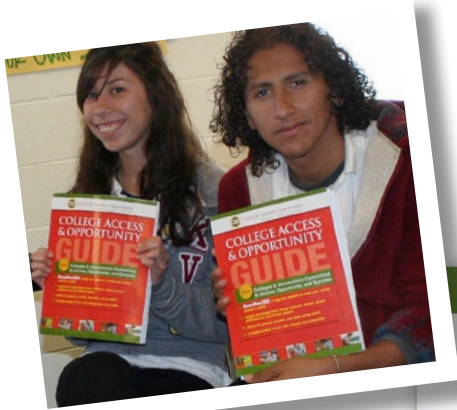




## Needs Assessment of Center for Student Opportunity's 2008-2009 College Access & Opportunity Guide



Fulfillment Fund, Gertz-Ressler High School, Los Angeles, CA



KIPP Houston High School, Houston, TX

2 0 1 1 E D I T I O N



# COLLEGE ACCESS & OPPORTUNITY



**INSIDE** Make your college dreams a reality!

- 266 colleges and universities committed to access, opportunity, and success
- Do you **KnowHow2GO**? Learn the steps you need to take
- Insider advice from college students, alumni, counselors, and college leaders
- Valuable information for parents, mentors, and other caring adults



## INTRODUCTION

Soon after Linda Perez began using the *College Access & Opportunity Guide* with her upper-division students at an enrichment program for low-income youth in San Francisco, the younger students began to ask to see it. With only one copy, there was actually a waiting list to look at the book. It became the focus of group meetings and students began calling it the 'red college bible.' Ultimately, Linda decided to give all sophomores their own copy to set them on the right path to college.



KIPP Houston High School, Houston, TX April 27, 2009

Not every student is lucky enough to have a Linda Perez in their life. In fact, two of the biggest barriers to college access and success are the lack of support students receive through the college process and a lack of access to good information about the many college opportunities available to low-income students and those working to be first in their family to go to college.

The National Center for Educational Statistics found that the national student-to-guidance counselor ratio is 488:1. The average student spends just 20 minutes per year talking to his or her counselor. According to the College Board, high-achieving students from low-income families have about the same chance of enrolling in college (78%) as low-achieving students from wealthier families (77%) (The College Keys Compact 2007).

Despite the fact that colleges and universities across the country are committed to serving and supporting students from traditionally underserved backgrounds, these students remain terribly underrepresented on college campuses. And even worse, those who do make it to college are not finding supportive college environments or graduating. According to a recent *USA Today* article, 89 percent of low-income, first-generation students leave college within six years without a degree.

Center for Student Opportunity (CSO) developed the *College Access & Opportunity Guide* to prepare first-generation, low-income and minority students for the college process and to give them a stronger understanding of colleges and universities committed to supporting them—financially, academically, and socially. There is a distinct need to foster and cement a college-going culture among students in under-resourced communities, and the Guide is a significant breakthrough in giving students the information they deserve to pursue and succeed in college.

Since its inaugural publication in 2008, the Guide is becoming a staple in college admissions offices, high school guidance offices, college centers, college access programs, community-based organizations, and libraries across the country. More importantly, it is gaining recognition as an essential all-in-one, student-friendly tool for students and families navigating an unfamiliar path to college.



Our goal is for the Guide to become a necessary resource for *all* traditionally underserved students and the many supporters who counsel these students every day. With this in mind—and with support from the Walmart Foundation—we commissioned a third-party evaluation of the Guide to examine the need for such a resource among low-income, first-generation students and their supporters. This report presents the study's findings.

## EVALUATION

In 2009, CSO contracted The Evaluation Center (TEC) at Western Michigan University to develop and implement a formative evaluation of the 2008-2009 *College Access & Opportunity Guide*.

Evaluation is understood as the merit, worth, and significance of something. To make judgments about the quality of the Guide, the evaluation team used both survey and focus group data to address a set of research questions:

- How are first-generation, low-income, and minority college-bound students learning about different colleges and preparing to take the steps necessary to get to college?
- How is the *College Access & Opportunity Guide* different from other college guidebooks, web sites, and resources students use?
- Do users of the *College Access & Opportunity Guide* recommend it to peers?
- What improvements can be made to the *College Access & Opportunity Guide*?

The goal was to gather sufficient information from users of the Guide—students, counselors, and parents—to help understand the strengths and weaknesses of the Guide, and associated improvement needs. The evaluation is intended to stimulate learning to help CSO develop future versions of the Guide that will further the mission of the organization.

## SURVEY

CSO and the evaluators collaborated to develop an online survey questionnaire, which was disseminated nationally to users of the Guide and examined a variety of factors, including perceptions of the usefulness and limitations of the Guide, who helps students make college choices, what factors are most important in those choices, and how college will be financed.

## FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Sites were chosen to obtain geographic and participant diversity.

Boys & Girls Club  
Oxnard, CA



The College Crusade of Rhode Island  
Providence, RI



College Success Foundation,  
Mt. Tahoma HS  
Seattle/Tacoma, WA



College Summit,  
Booker T. Washington  
Public Charter HS  
Washington, DC



Cristo Rey Jesuit HS  
Baltimore, MD



Berea GEAR UP  
Berea, KY



DC GEAR UP, HD Woodson HS  
Washington, DC



KIPP Houston HS  
Houston, TX



Project GRAD Houston  
Houston, TX



See Forever Foundation,  
Maya Angelou Public Charter HS  
Washington, DC



Fulfillment Fund,  
Gertz-Ressler HS  
Los Angeles, CA



Upward Bound,  
Western Michigan University  
Kalamazoo, MI



## KEY FINDINGS

### 1) Students need better resources to understand the steps to go to college

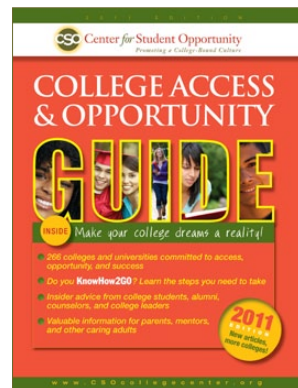
Students mentioned the internet, friends, siblings, several college access programs, teachers and counselors as the resources most used to research and prepare for college. However, most students reported never having used college guidebooks in the past and many were unfamiliar with the *College Access & Opportunity Guide* before the focus group.

Additionally, many counselors said that they “do not believe their students understand the necessary steps to go to college” or that “the students are only vaguely familiar with them.” One counselor described their students’ understanding of the necessary steps to go to college as follows: “They have all the right answers but their actions don’t show it.” One counselor’s interpretation of their students’ thoughts on the necessary steps to college is: “I know how to

apply,’ because they’ve filled out an application to apply to work at McDonalds or they filled out an application for a small internship or summer opportunity and it’s not the same thing.

**“Many counselors said that they ‘do not believe their student understands the necessary steps to go to college.’”**

An application to get to college, to get a scholarship program takes so much more time, effort, follow through, and to follow up they don’t understand the depth of it.”



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### 2) The Guide keeps students’ attention and is customized for them

According to TEC evaluators, findings demonstrated that the *College Access & Opportunity Guide* is easy to read and understand, visually appealing, keeps the attention of students, includes information about colleges and about preparing for college, and is customized for minority and first-generation students.

Some of the positive ways in which students mentioned the Guide was different include the following:

- Straight to the point
- Easier to use than Web sites since all the information is located on one page
- Easier to read
- Targeted to minorities and first-generation students
- Includes a timeline

Most students felt the College Profile section was different from other guidebooks in positive ways in that it:

- Talked about different scholarships offered by each college
- Broke down the cost of attendance and admissions requirements
- Was easy to use
- Shows diversity of the student population
- Was straight to the point and easier to use than Web sites since all the information was located on one page.

One counselor described the Guide as less overwhelming than other guidebooks, because it was not as huge; it was something that the students could look through versus only something an expert could navigate.

## KEY FINDINGS

### 3) Students and counselors recommend the Guide

Ultimately, the majority of students said that they would recommend the Guide to their friends, school counselors, friends that do not know how to prepare for college, high school freshmen, sophomores, and juniors, and for individuals that do not have internet access.

One student commented that they would recommend the Guide, “Because it is super easy to read, because I’m pretty lazy at reading, it’s just the text and how it gets right to the point, it’s not a lot of wording. It’s just something we can read and something we can understand because other things are so wordy . . .” Similarly, another student supported their statement by saying: “It’s like a bible. Let’s be realistic, this is something I can actually read.” Yet another student said: “The terminology and information is for kids our level and focused on people like us who have not been exposed to college before.”

Counselors too recommend the Guide because it helps students know where to start with the college process. One respondent said they would recommend the Guide particularly because “a lot of this is what seniors need to hear and it’s sad to say that some seniors don’t even know why they should go to college. I think this book is kind of laid out like a magazine it’s kind of like a cool layout with color pages, it’s much easier for them to pick up a book like this and read these first few pages and remain interested than some of the other guidebooks I have that are small print, black and white.”

**“The terminology and information is for kids our level and focused on people like us who have not been exposed to college before.”**



### 4) Room for improvement

The evaluation offered constructive feedback that will be addressed to improve future editions of the *College Access & Opportunity Guide*. When asked if there was anything missing from the Guide students predominately mentioned that additional colleges should be included. Other information that students would like to see included the following categories:

- Ways to get financial aid
- How to complete applications (include good and bad examples)
- What tests are required for admissions
- How easy it is to get around campus
- More personal stories

Center for Student Opportunity has already responded to the many good ideas shared. The new edition of the *College Access & Opportunity Guide*, set to publish in July 2010, will include more colleges, expanded information on financial aid, more student-friendly articles, Spanish-language information for non-English speaking parents and adult mentors, and testimonials from students from each college.



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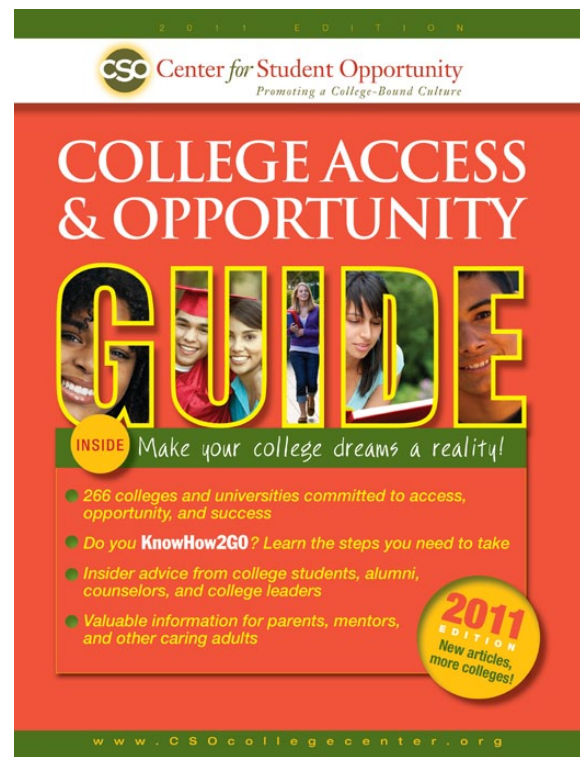


## CONCLUSION

While underserved students receive guidance and support inside and outside of school, most do not have a full understanding of the steps necessary to turn their college dreams into reality. They are woefully underprepared to choose the college that is the right fit for them.

We need to help these students become active consumers in the college process, and this study demonstrates the *College Access & Opportunity Guide* to be a tool that fills this vital need. Whether a student doesn't know how to fill out a FAFSA, write a college essay, or research the support programs at the colleges they're applying to, the Guide responds to these challenges head-on with easy-to-read information on the college process and sheds light on the many college opportunities that exist for first-generation and low-income college-bound students.

If the ultimate goal is to make sure first-generation and low-income students see college as more than a dream, CSO's mission is to make sure copies of the *College Access & Opportunity Guide* get into the hands of students who need it most to set them on the right path to college.



### CSO COLLEGE CENTER

Prior to the conception of the *College Access & Opportunity Guide*, CSO built CSO College Center ([www.csocollegecenter.org](http://www.csocollegecenter.org)), a website used today by first-generation and traditionally underserved students who are looking for information and guidance about the college process.

CSO College Center makes students better consumers in the college process and helps them evaluate colleges with a more personal approach—rather than simply choosing a school that's down the road or the one with the best basketball team, students are encouraged to learn how schools will support them academically, financially, and socially to ensure their success and persistence to graduation.

Students who use the Guide are able to continue their research on CSO College Center and directly communicate with colleges and universities committed to serving and supporting them.

## How we can partner...

### Foundations & Corporations

Many foundations and corporations have a philanthropic commitment to advancing college access and success for the traditionally underserved. We invite you to partner with Center for Student Opportunity in serving this shared goal.

As a nonprofit organization, we do not commercially market the *College Access & Opportunity Guide* but rather focus our distribution efforts on aligning with strong partners who share common college access goals and see the Guide as a valuable tool to support first-generation, low-income students in their pursuit of college.

**We look forward to hearing from you and exploring how a partnership with CSO can advance your philanthropic goals.**

### Counselors & College Access Providers

If you are a counselor or college access provider concerned with preparing underserved students for college, chances are you are overwhelmed by the many college resources competing for you and your students' attention today.

However, the *College Access & Opportunity Guide* is one resource worthy of your attention. The Guide stands apart from traditional college guidebooks and websites because the information is visually appealing and customized for minority and first-generation students.

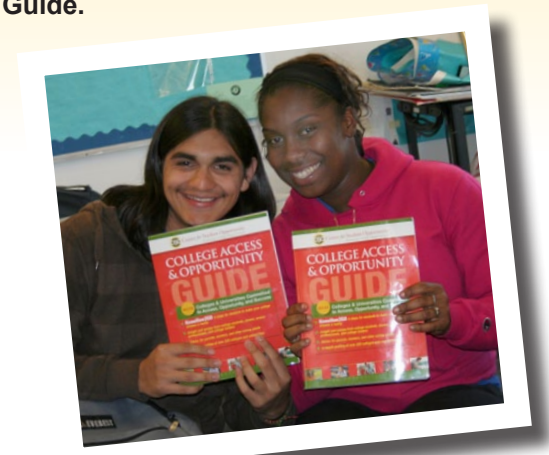
**We share a common goal, so please contact us to learn more about partnering with CSO and how you can use the Guide to complement your existing efforts to prepare underserved students for college.**

### Colleges & Universities

Colleges and universities understand their responsibility to provide academic, financial, and social support to ensure all students have every chance to succeed. But many schools still struggle to effectively serve first-generation and underserved students on their campus.

CSO partners with 280+ four-year colleges and universities and supports their efforts to bring opportunities to more traditionally underserved students. The *College Access & Opportunity Guide* is one part of a comprehensive college partnership program designed to build awareness of your institution and its college access programs, recruit qualified and motivated low-income, first-generation students, and improve outreach, recruitment and retention efforts on your campus.

**As we work towards a shared goal of increased college access and success for low-income, first-generation students, we invite you to partner with CSO and showcase your school in the Guide.**



Fulfillment Fund, Gertz-Ressler High School,  
Los Angeles, CA April 15, 2009

**Please contact us  
Email [info@csopportunity.org](mailto:info@csopportunity.org) or  
call (301) 951-7101 ext. 214**



Center for Student Opportunity (CSO) is a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting higher education opportunities for first-generation and other traditionally underserved college-bound students. CSO programs serve colleges and universities, counselors, and community-based organizations in support of their college access goals. More information about CSO is available at [www.CSOppportunity.org](http://www.CSOppportunity.org).

To request a copy of the Needs Assessment of Center for Student Opportunity's 2008-2009 *College Access & Opportunity Guide* final report, contact [info@csoppportunity.org](mailto:info@csoppportunity.org) or download it at [www.csoppportunity.org](http://www.csoppportunity.org).

*Physical Address:*  
4903 Auburn Avenue  
Bethesda, MD 20814

*Mailing Address:*  
P.O. Box 30370  
Bethesda, MD 20824

P: (301) 951-7101  
F: (301) 951-7104

[info@CSOppportunity.org](mailto:info@CSOppportunity.org)  
[www.CSOppportunity.org](http://www.CSOppportunity.org)