Program Summary and Philosophy

The PantherPath: 5th Grade to Future Grad program for 5th grade classrooms in Milwaukee Public Schools introduces higher education as an attainable goal through curriculum, student mentorship, and a UWM campus visit. Based on research showing the critical role middle schools play in college preparedness and graduation rates, the program begins in the classroom with a curriculum that focuses on basic college concepts. Students explore options, benefits, and financial and academic preparation. During this time, mentors from UWM School of Education visit monthly to share experiences of college and serve as role models for the students. The program culminates in a campus visit simulating a day in the life of a college freshman: attending orientation, participating in classroom activities, eating lunch, and touring the campus. The goal of the program is to spark interest and curiosity in the minds of young low-income students and their families about college and help prepare them for a path to higher education.

In the 2009-2010 school year we served:

1072 students from 41 Milwaukee classrooms in 23 schools.

5th Grade Students—Each 5th grade student completed a pre-evaluation and a post-evaluation which included short answer questions. Each student also completed an evaluation on the day of their campus visit which compared their understanding of topics before they came to the campus visit to after they came to campus.

49% Increase in students ability to see themselves on a campus like UWM some day
71% Increase in students desire to go to college

5th Grade Teachers—At the end of the program teachers were asked to complete an online survey which discussed their experience with the program.

94% agreed that the content of the curriculum helped the students learn about college.
88% indicated a desire to participate in the future

UWM Mentors—Mentors completed a verification form for their experience which included a reflection of their experience as well as an online survey.

91% said there was evidence that students showed interest in college and higher education
71% thought the activities were effective in engaging with the students.
77% indicated that the school visits allowed them to get to know the students
**Program Testimonial**

**5th Grade Students**

“Thank you for giving me a better knowledge about college. The food and tour was awesome! My favorite part was when we got to walk around EVERYWhere! I learned that college is an amazing path to go to meet new people, learn, and have fun.” Mariana Rosales

“I would like to give a special thanks to Mrs. Denise for giving me that wonderful speech that motivated me a lot and it also motivated my brain to go to college and encourage me to believe in myself so I thank you for allowing us to your wonderful learning environment. So once again thank you and all who made it possible for all of the schools including ours to come to UWM College.” Jazmine Davis

“I really enjoyed it because I have never seen an actual college in person before and that was really cool so thank you once again.” Darian Schindel-Jackson

“Thank you for allowing my class, Goodrich Elementary School to come to have a tour and lessons about college. From that experience I will now be ready for college and know what I need to be prepared for how it will be for me for those years I am there. Now I know a lot more about college, about homework, dorms, green house and more just from UWM allowing us to come on the campus and learn about it.” Justice Hayes-Cox

“I loved my visit there, it was exciting and fun. It opened my eyes to get more excited about going to college. I loved the classes, the learning and the lunch. Thank you for letting us visit, hope we come again.” Mariah Bantrey-Henderson

**5th Grade Teachers**

“Thanks for all your hard work putting together such a wonderful program for fifth graders.” Mary Goham—Kluge School

“The program was great. It gave me a way to infuse the value of what they are doing (in the classroom) to their future. Thank you so much for a fabulous experience. We came back and started internet searches for colleges.” Vicki Johnson—I.D.E.A.L. School

**UWM Mentors**

“I thought this program was beneficial to students, teachers, and mentors alike.” Amanda Beilke

“I feel very fortunate that I was able to participate in this program and would love to do it again in the future.” Chelsea Hubal

“They asked really great questions, and I think that this planted a little seed that will encourage them to pursue a college education.” Allison Champion
Importance of College Awareness and Connections for Middle School Students

Panther Path’s Goal: A Statewide Priority:

UW Extension and UW System have identified access and increased graduation rates among Wisconsin residents as key priorities. By reducing barriers to participation, UW wants to increase access to its educational resources and degree programs and increase graduation rates by 30 percent in 15 years. UWS goal is to increase undergraduate degrees per year from 26,000 to over 33,000 by 2025.

Importance of Middle School Years in Graduation Rates

Robert Balfanz, from Johns Hopkins University, summarized the importance of the middle school years in A Policy and Practice Brief: Putting Middle Grades Students on the Graduation Path, National Middle School Association, June 2009

“Two thousand high schools produce half the nation’s dropouts and more than two-thirds of its minority dropouts. The nation’s dropout crisis is driven by these high schools and their feeder middle grades schools. Until we transform these high schools and the middle grades schools in which large numbers of students are falling off the path to graduation, the nation will not achieve its goal of graduating all its students from high school prepared for college, career, and civic life.

“First and foremost, the research demonstrates that the middle grades matter—tremendously. During the middle grades, students in high-poverty environments are either launched on the path to high school graduation or knocked off-track.

“As our research, experience, and the work of many others have shown, particularly in high-poverty environments, a student’s middle grades experience is critical to his or her life’s chances. It is during the middle grades that students either launch toward achievement and attainment, or slide off track and placed on a path of frustration, failure, and, ultimately, early exit from the only secure path to adult success. This essential path is leaving high school prepared for post-secondary education and career training.”

Connections to Community Important

Martinez, M. R., & Klopott, S. discuss community connections as one factor in increasing graduation rates in How is school reform tied to increasing college
access and success for low-income and minority youth?, A white paper for the Pathways to College Network. Boston: Pathways to College Network (2002). One recommendation in this area is as follows:

“Improve the school-community connection to bring relevance to students’ learning experience, thus engaging students in school while building ties to the community. For students who are most at risk for school failure, linking education to experience is often a critical form of support.”

Predisposition to College and Career Choices Key to College Preparedness

Sharon J. Camblin, Ph.D., a Special Projects Coordinator with Pacific Resources for Education and Learning, supporting its work with the Pathways to College Network, identified the importance of college awareness in her article, The Middle Grades: Putting All Students on Track for College, April 2003

“The choice to go to college is a three-stage developmental process that includes predisposition, searching, and choosing. These stages begin as early as the 7th grade. According to Cabrera, La Nasa, and Burkum (2001), most 9th graders have already developed both occupational and educational aspirations. Each stage has particular cognitive and affective outcomes that cumulatively prepare students to make certain decisions regarding their college education. Each stage interacts with the previous stage in subtle and complex ways.

Most closely associated with the middle grades is the predisposition stage, which is when students develop their occupational and educational aspirations. A challenge for parents and school personnel is to help students see the connection between thinking they want to go to college and learning how to prepare for college entrance. The ages between 10 and 14 are most commonly when students engage or disengage from school and learning. The transition to middle school has been associated with a decline in academic achievement, performance motivation, and self-perception (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2002). The middle grades classroom influences whether students see themselves as smart and worthy of taking challenging courses in high school. As they develop an adult self-concept, self-esteem, and racial identity, students make decisions about how academic achievement, certain careers, and college fit into this self-perception.

Research statistics suggest that middle grades students often think about going to college but fail to plan or obtain support for the intermediate steps (Cabrera, La Nasa, & Burkum, 2001; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1994). The tragedy is that the failure at an early age to develop a plan for approaching college has dramatic impact on what actually happens to students, especially those considered underserved. Students who focus on going to college during the middle grades are far more successful at actually attending college despite other challenges (Cabrera, La Nasa, & Burkum, 2001).”