Believing the College Dream is a curriculum guide that supports teachers, counselors and community organization staffs in their work to increase the expectations of attending college by prospective low-income, first-generation college students in grades 4-8. The lessons and workshops strive to prepare students and their families for successful transitions along the academic pipeline from elementary school through middle school, high school and on to postsecondary education.

Although most parents aspire to economic and social success for their children, low-income parents of first-generation college students often lack the knowledge and firsthand experience necessary to help their children participate in higher education. This guide was created as an early intervention measure to help bridge wide disparities of income, race and ethnicity that exist in access to and success in higher education.

ECMC Foundation and the University of California, Berkeley, Center for Educational Partnerships previously collaborated on Realizing the College Dream, a college access and success curriculum geared primarily to middle schools and high schools. Since 2004, hundreds of thousands of students have been taught this curriculum. However, leading researchers have shown that college information should start even earlier. Some of their findings:

- Students who decide early to go to college are more likely to enter higher education.
- Families that lack college information or resources are less likely to send their children to college.
- Schools where counselors collaborate with other staff members and students send more students to college.1

A 2009 American Psychological Association study concluded that thinking about college as being within reach (i.e., learning about opportunities for financial aid) or out of reach (i.e., hearing about the enormous costs of higher education) appears to affect achievement goals in young students from low-income families. The study shows that children as young as 11 plan to spend more time studying and have greater expectations of their own academic performance when they view attending college as a realistic possibility (thanks to financial aid). However, this positive effect is not seen in children whose grades are already low, suggesting that families need to be given information about the financial accessibility of college early on, before students fall too far behind.2

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