



## RESEARCH BRIEF

for the Houston Independent School District

Volume No. 4, Issue No. 8 – July, 2016

### ***College Advising Program: CSA Feedback***

By Amanda Bancroft, M.A. and Irina Chukhray, M.A.

*College Success Advisors (CSAs) worked during the 2015-2016 school year to ensure that HISD high school students would receive the highest quality advising services and enroll in a best-fit post-secondary school. During interviews about their experiences over the past academic year, conducted during spring 2016, CSAs gave feedback on implementation of the College Advising Program at their specific campus(es) and provided suggestions for the future of the program. The most common of these suggestions have been collected and reported here. These include the importance of CSA/student identity overlap, concerns about students' college readiness, and the positive changes CSAs have seen in students over the course of the academic year.*

#### **BACKGROUND**

The college advising program was implemented during the 2015-16 academic year in an effort to boost students' postsecondary outcomes. Under this program, the district hired 28 College Success Advisors (CSAs) with the explicit task of guiding high school seniors in their college and financial aid applications. The district aimed to place advisors in schools such that all HISD high schools had roughly the same advisor-to-senior ratio. Because there were more schools than advisors, this means that some advisors were assigned to two or more high schools and divided their time amongst these schools. As some high schools have very small student populations, this allowed the college advising program to obtain approximately the same advisor-to-senior ratio across schools.

The college advising project broadly aimed to assess the extent to which the hiring of college advisors affects college and financial aid outcomes for HISD students. The project also aimed to identify effective mechanisms for college advising. For college advising to be effective and as productive as possible, an additional qualitative component (i.e., interviews) gauged CSA's experiences, such as

challenges and obstacles over the 2015-16 academic year.

The present brief pertains to the interview component of the larger college advising project. The interview component addressed advisors' overall experience with the college advising program and at the advisor's individual schools, access to students, availability of resources, and advisor's overall assessment of students' college readiness. Furthermore, although all advisors had approximately the same advisor-to-senior ratio, those advisors who were assigned multiple schools may have encountered different experiences and obstacles than those advisors assigned to one school location. The interview component aimed to understand these varying experiences and needs of the CSAs in order to help the college advising program be as productive and effective as possible.

The authors of this brief were initially introduced to the CSAs at one of the monthly professional development meetings for advisors. Observation of discussions at these meetings guided some of the initial construction of interview questions. In addition to this, the authors met with leaders of the college advising program at HISD and incorporated the district's interests in the interview questions. Following

the district's approval of the interview questions, the authors interviewed CSAs at their individual schools and a small number at the professional development meetings. Further interview detail is outlined below in the data and methods section.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

(Note: Please see Appendix for full interview guide)

- How is implementation of the College Advising Program progressing at each of the campuses?
- What is going well?
- What needs improvement?
- What are some campus-level factors that have either enabled or constrained college advising?

## DATA AND METHODS

### *Data*

Qualitative interviews were conducted with CSAs during the spring of 2016. A total of 25 interviews were conducted, with the entire population of CSAs (less those who were lost to staffing changes). The interview guide included 11 questions which covered everything from CSA's perceptions of the macro-level organization of the program to the logistics of their day-to-day duties. CSAs were asked to provide feedback about how the program is being implemented on the ground at each campus, and to engage with the specific constraints and benefits of each campus environment, as well as those of the program overall. Interviews ranged from 14 minutes to 96 minutes, with a mean of 48 minutes and a median of 44 minutes. CSAs were compensated with a \$10 gift card.

### *Analytic Strategy*

CSA interviews were coded based on a selection of codes that researchers collected in memos written immediately after each interview. The code list was refined and expanded over the course of reading through all twenty-five full interview transcripts. Both researchers participated in the coding and refinement process.

## RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

(Note: Codes cited below [A, B, C], and their frequencies, are described in Table 1 Appendix)

### *General feedback*

College Success Advisors (CSAs) are overwhelmingly positive about the College Advising Program, and the changes that it has brought to the district throughout the 2015-16 academic year (code A). CSAs treasure the bonds they developed with students, many of whom have made significant personal gains this year (codes M, D). The advisors believe that the new, data-driven system is more structured and strategic, and more impactful than previous programs in the district and in their previous experiences as educators and advisors (code A). Although CSAs understand and appreciate the target group system, several identified issues with the current targeting of students at their particular campus(es), citing that the strategy in place does not necessarily work equivalently across campuses and student populations (code I). They have also identified a need to further involve larger communities around each campus in the college culture-building process (code T).

- **Specific recommendation(s):** A more campus-specific approach to targeting students, or one that at least identifies groups of similar campuses in order to refine the targeting process.

### *Resources: problems and solutions*

CSAs noted the issues they confronted in dealing with what they perceived as tight budgets, in areas ranging from human resources to physical resources at both the district and the campus level (codes P, N). These situations were sometimes exacerbated by the constraints created by splitting individual CSAs across multiple campuses, including trouble with campus relationship/rapport building, resource inconsistencies across campuses, and working with vastly different campus cultures that require very disparate skill sets (code G). A lack of appropriate space that is both accessible for students yet appropriate for sensitive discussions was a common concern (code E). Data entry was also commonly cited as something that is not only difficult (odd skip patterns in the Google doc, other redundancies in the process), but that is also less useful than it might be, especially for maintaining a cohesive file on each student for CSA access (code K). Interestingly, one organic process that has helped many CSAs (particularly

those with extra time constraints) is the spreading of information through informal student channels - especially close friend groups (code O).

- **Specific recommendation(s):** First, a formalized “student liaison” system, which trains highly motivated students to disseminate information to and assist other students with the college application and preparation process, especially when their CSA is at another school (which is already happening informally at many campuses). Second, software that allows for a more streamlined data entry process and for the collection of complete, ongoing file on each student.

#### *CSA/student overlap*

Race and/or gender congruence between teachers and students can be helpful in developing trusting relationships and potentially improving student performance (Dee 2005 and 2007; Eddy and Easton-Brooks 2011; Egalite Kisida, and Winters 2015). Likewise, CSAs who share various types of identity overlap with their students have found it to be beneficial in creating and maintaining trusting relationships with both students and parents. CSAs cited racial/ethnic, linguistic, first generation, and family background/socioeconomic overlap (codes B, X, U) as most helpful. CSAs who do not share this overlap (especially with regard to language) have found this has been a barrier to their work with students and parents.

- **Specific recommendation(s):** This is another area where a formalized “student liaison” system might be beneficial, particularly for contacting and working with Spanish speaking students, and even more specifically for students who might be undocumented.

#### *Relationship building*

A common tactic used by CSAs is building working relationships with faculty and administrators at their campuses, and clarifying the goals of the program to other key stakeholders early, clearly, and often (codes H, F). When accomplished, these relationships leveraged greater access to students (and thus improved trust and rapport), improved access to resources, and amelioration of conflicts or misunderstandings (codes Q, M, E, P, S). In the absence of such relationship capital (a scenario which is more common among CSAs splitting

time between campuses), access to students and resources is more difficult and conflicts and misunderstandings are more common (code R).

- **Specific recommendation(s):** CSAs seemed to endure a variable-length troubleshooting period in which they had to get on the “same page” with the stakeholders, educators, and leaders at their campuses. It appears that the majority of these relational woes have been resolved, but clear messaging about the goals of the program are key. We suggest that this messaging be treated as an ongoing project and that it perhaps take place at even higher levels of leadership (in order to quell political perceptions of “competition” between various campus stakeholders, especially where shrinking district budgets are concerned).

#### *Professional development*

Professional development was seen as useful for some CSAs, but others questioned the timeliness and applicability of trainings to their campus(es) (code L). Many (especially those with multiple campuses) also questioned the ultimate return on investment for their time away from campus, which further constrained their time and jeopardized their relationships with staff, students, and other stakeholders (codes M, H, F). CSAs with large proportions of students who are SPED, who are undocumented, or who have undocumented parents, have requested that further trainings be provided that will assist with the hurdles that those populations face (code W).

- **Specific recommendation(s):** More campus-specific or topic-specific PD (e.g., postsecondary opportunities for undocumented or special ed students) might also be useful, in addition to breakout sessions that bring together CSAs from similar campuses, or facing similar issues. CSAs with multiple campuses could potentially use a PD schedule that caters more to their scheduling needs. Finally, trainings on how to best navigate and develop relationships with other stakeholders might be useful.

#### *Persistence*

CSAs worry about students’ ability to persist throughout college, and are generally concerned that while the focus on applications is beneficial for students, persistence should also

be addressed (code C). While CSAs realize that academic (un)readiness is a major barrier to college persistence (particularly for students at highly disadvantaged campuses), there should be more formal services in place to ensure successful enrollment and continuation throughout college, and that small seeds for college readiness can be planted earlier in students' academic careers (code J). Feeder patterns are also deeply ingrained at some campuses (code V).

- **Specific recommendation(s):** College readiness information must be planted earlier in students' academic careers. These need not be financially costly or time-consuming but can be as simple as letting middle school students know that their GPAs matter throughout high school, that the top 10 percent of TX high school students get automatic admission, and that many selective colleges meet student financial need. Formal bridge services, which continue support for students as they enter college (or connections to such services), are also needed as the College Advising Program moves forward. Existing feeder patterns at certain schools, which automatically channel students into lower-tier and two-year institutions, must also be addressed and (where possible) disrupted.

## REFERENCES

Dee, Thomas S. 2005. "A Teacher Like Me: Does Race, Ethnicity, or Gender Matter?" *American Economic Review* 95(2):158-65.

Dee, Thomas S. 2007. "Teachers and the Gender Gaps in Student Achievement." *Journal of Human Resources* 42(3):528-54.

Eddy, Colleen M., and Donald Easton-Brooks. 2011. "Ethnic Matching, School Placement, and Mathematics Achievement of African American Students from Kindergarten Through Fifth Grade." *Urban Education*:1280-99.

Egalite, Anna J., Brian Kisida, and Marcus A. Winters. 2015. "Representation in the classroom: The effect of own-race teachers on student achievement." *Economics of Education Review* 45:44-52.

**This report reflects the on-the-ground experiences of practitioners and is intended for future implementation purposes only.**

This is an abbreviated version of a much longer research study written for peer review. For additional information on the findings presented here, or to obtain the full peer-review version of this research brief, contact the Houston Education Research Consortium at 713-348-2802 or email [herec@rice.edu](mailto:herec@rice.edu).

## Begin Appendix Information Here...

*Table 1*

<b>CODE</b>	<b>TITLE</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>% FREQ.</b>
<b>A</b>	General feedback	General assessment of year, what they appreciated, including the rewards and impact	72%
<b>B</b>	Overlap (racial/ ethnic/ linguistic)	Identity overlap in these categories, including whether overlap was helpful or its absence was a barrier	56%
<b>C</b>	Student readiness, ability to persist	Concerns about students college readiness and their ability to finish college	48%
<b>D</b>	Change in students	Positive changes in students, including academic achievement, college knowledge, motivation	48%
<b>E</b>	Space and privacy	Importance of appropriate space that is both accessible and reasonably private	44%
<b>F</b>	Goals clarified to stakeholders	Importance of early and ongoing messaging and collaboration	44%
<b>G</b>	Difficulties with multiple campuses	Challenges faced, including time constraints, trouble with relationship building, and resource issues	36%
<b>H</b>	Importance of campus-wide relationships	Importance of building key relationships across campus and leveraging these for students' benefit	36%
<b>I</b>	Target group system	Challenges faced with implementation of target group system across divergent campuses, populations	32%
<b>J</b>	Earlier advising	Critical nature of early contact, advising to motivate students toward higher achievement	28%
<b>K</b>	Data entry and process	Frustrations with the process and its utility for everyday and long-term operations	28%
<b>L</b>	Professional development	Mixed reporting on professional development; appreciated but room for improvement	24%
<b>M</b>	Bond with students	Emotional investment in students by CSAs	24%
<b>N</b>	Overwhelmed	Stressful nature of some material aspects of this job, ranging from time constraints to relationship concerns	24%
<b>O</b>	Student liaisons	Discussion of the informal student dissemination of information within certain campuses	20%
<b>P</b>	Budget	Discussion of budget concerns	20%
<b>Q</b>	Difficulty accessing students	Barriers to accessing students, from time constraints to underdeveloped relationships with teachers	16%

<b>R</b>	Communication	Unsatisfactory communication with managers and/or campus personnel	16%
<b>S</b>	Staff/faculty conflict	Discussion of various conflicts, both campus- and program-specific	16%
<b>T</b>	Need for community involvement	Community surrounding campuses could help bolster college-going culture	12%
<b>U</b>	Overlap (family background/SES)	Identity overlap in this category helpful	8%
<b>V</b>	Feeder patterns	Need to assess existing feeder patterns	8%
<b>W</b>	More training for SPED, undocumented	Need for more extensive training for certain disadvantaged populations	8%
<b>X</b>	Overlap (1 <sup>st</sup> gen student)	Identity overlap in this category helpful	8%

*Interview Guide*

College Advising Experience

1. I'm really interested to know how you came to be a college advisor.
  - a. Your motivations?
  - b. Have you had previous college advising jobs?
2. Tell me, in your own words, about your experiences as a college advisor this year.
3. What is the college-going climate/culture like?
  - a. How has it changed since you arrived?
  - b. (*If applicable*) How would your experience at this school compare to your experience at other schools?
4. How much access do you have to students?
5. How supportive are staff and faculty, administrators, and other college access professionals on your campus(es) of your advising duties and activities?
  - a. In your opinion, do you have access to the resources that you need? Please explain.
  - b. Do you have access to space(s), scheduling resources, and other tools that make your job easier?
6. What would you change about the advising program here at this school?
  - a. What is working well?
  - b. What could be improved?

Working with Students

7. How would you assess students' overall college readiness at this school?
  - a. What things do you consider when evaluating students' overall college readiness?
8. Who do you think college advising has helped the most? Least? (How so?)
9. I would like for you to think about a student with whom you had a particularly *strong* connection with...Please describe the connection with your student.
  - a. What makes the connection particularly strongly in your opinion?
  - b. Why do you think this student is particularly responsive to you?
  - c. Do you maybe share something in your background with your student that enables the connection with him/her?
10. Now, please think about a student with whom you have a *poor* connection...In your opinion, why do you think the connection is poor?
  - a. Why do you think the student is not very responsive?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your college advising experience that I have not touched upon?