NC STATE UNIVERSITY

College of Education
Belk Center for Community College
Leadership and Research

HOW CAN WE WORK TOGETHER?
Findings and Recommendations for Improving Communication Strategies for College and Career Access Service Providers

Introduction

This brief is the first in a series of three that report the findings of a study examining promising practices for college and career access providers working in North Carolina (NC) high schools. This brief will focus on how these different organizations communicate, collaborate, and share information when working in the same school. The Belk Center research team collected and analyzed qualitative data from organizations and school staff working in three high schools in the northwest region of the state.

The findings suggest that some schools are already implementing best practices to maximize communication, collaboration, and information sharing. Still, all schools could benefit from expanding these practices to increase their effectiveness and eliminate redundancies when serving students.

Key Points

- When college and career service staff work in schools with established practices for documenting and sharing information about their meetings with students, they report less confusion about how to meet their students' needs.

- Much of the software college and career services staff can use to document information and share it with other staff is already available at these schools. By agreeing on what and how to document and by consistently following these practices, staff members can streamline their work and improve their collaboration to more effectively help students.

- Regular meetings of college and career service staff help everyone better plan school-wide events, be aware of different resources and opportunities, and understand their individual and collective responsibilities. Participants reported better coordination and understanding of their individual roles when college and career support staff meet regularly throughout the school year.

Background and Context

Despite the variations between Ashe County High School, Alleghany High School, and West Wilkes High School, one major area of commonality is that there are numerous college and career services operating within each school. These services are provided by organizations and positions such as Wilkes Community College career coaches, Gear Up coordinators, Upward Bound academic coordinators, College Advising Corps advisers, Career Development Coordinators, and school counselors.

Each of these organizations individually and collectively provide a wide range of services to students, parents/guardians, and family members. Such services include one-on-one and group interactions with students and families about post-secondary planning and preparation, FAFSA assistance and events, aid in searching for and applying to scholarships, help with college applications, assistance in finding internships or jobs, and many more.

Though certain organizations may only work with a particular subset of students, there is often overlap of services provided to students and families meaning that students may interact with staff representing multiple organizations during their high school careers. In addition to interacting with multiple organizations, students and staff are also navigating staff turnover which may influence the cooperative dynamic between organizations. For the different organizations operating in the schools, there is a need to collectively track and share data regarding student and family engagements to ensure that each and every student is being reached and provided with accurate and timely information that will benefit their post-secondary career and education plans.

Data and Methods

This brief follows up on an initial study by the Belk Center at NC State University from 2021 that investigated how these organizations operate throughout North Carolina. As such, this descriptive investigation should be seen as continuing an initial foray into learning how college and career support organizations partner at the secondary school-level to serve students. The project used a qualitative approach to investigate how different college and career service providers work together to serve students at three high schools in northwestern North Carolina. Ashe County High School, Alleghany High School, and West Wilkes High School all vary in students' prior achievement, school size, socioeconomic characteristics of the student population, and school district. Each of these schools, on the other hand, share geographic proximity and a strong participation in the dual enrollment program with Wilkes Community College (WCC).

All three schools also work with multiple college and career service providers, including counselors, WCC Career Coaches, Gear Up Coordinators, Upward Bound Academic Coordinators, and Career Development Coordinators. Based on the data, the research team devised recommendations for developing promising practices for coordinating the work of multiple college and career service providers. For additional detail on methods, see the Appendix.

Findings

Across the interviews and focus groups conducted as part of this project, inter-organizational communication was a commonly discussed topic. Organizations noted that they often collaborate within the schools, particularly around overlapping areas of services.

On the formal side, some organizations have come together to form committees or have regularly scheduled meetings between the different organizations. Such meetings allow for greater sharing of information between the organizations, particularly regarding events or other major activities. These collaborative meetings are viewed favorably by those involved, and provide a useful avenue for bridging gaps and sharing between organizations but may not be present in all schools or utilized to their full effectiveness.

Some organizations noted that they have a shared document where they can track how they engage with students which is accessible to the various providers. However, such documents are also supplemental to the data collection required by the individual organizations and represents an additional step in the work of the organizations that is sometimes missed or overlooked.

Beyond inter-organizational communication, those interviewed also highlighted the need to have access to institutional student-level data and data systems to be able to effectively advise and interact with students. This need echoes the findings of a separate study of the NC Career Coach Program. When staff document interactions with students, it can also help develop a better personalized relationship with students, because they can more easily recall the specifics of what students said. This effect could be especially helpful for staff with large caseloads. Greater collaboration, communication, and sharing of data allows organizations and providers to be more effective in their work to aid students and families in planning their post-secondary journeys.

Recommendations

- **USE A SHARED SYSTEM FOR DOCUMENTING STUDENT MEETINGS AND MILESTONES FOR COLLEGE AND CAREER PLANNING PURPOSES.**

  At each of the schools, college and career services staff discussed the value of systematically sharing information about their meetings with students. Participants noted that having a system for sharing when college and career staff met with students and what they discussed can be helpful for avoiding multiple people completing the same task. This can also be helpful for avoiding miscommunication about students between different members of the college and career services team. Popular cloud-based file sharing services, like Google Drive or Microsoft OneDrive, would facilitate this recommendation. Prior to the start of the academic year, the college and career services team should create a shared folder of documents each team member can access and modify. These documents should record updates regarding course enrollment, college admissions activities, and any other information that would complete the goals of these staff members. various information all staff members should know. All individuals who are providing college and career programming at the schools should have access to and be able to modify these documents. This documentation should record meetings about the following information: course selection process completion, dual enrollment process completion, college entrance exam completion, college application process completion, and FAFSA completion. Of course, other information that staff believe are important to record could be included. Importantly, these documents should be careful not to violate FERPA regulations.

  Guided by their professional experience, college and career staff at each school are best able to determine what information is recorded in order to create the most effective system for their school. However, a standardized system for documenting this information across all schools partnering with WCC could be useful, because it could diminish the learning curve for new hires from a partnering district. College and career staff, school administrators, and relevant WCC staff should create and communicate a written policy for this documentation system. All staff should be trained before the school year begins on what to document and when to do so. School administrators and relevant WCC staff should have access to the documents in order to make sure the documentation system is being used effectively and as intended according to the written policy. Some participants noted they have attempted to implement similar practices, but because of turnover and inconsistent usage, they never took hold. It is imperative for school-level college and career service staff to be consistent in documenting this information. College and career service staff could facilitate consistency by scheduling five to ten minutes between student meetings to allow for documentation. Training staff on this documentation prior to the start of the academic year can provide an opportunity for problems to be addressed and adjustments to be made.

- **PRIORITIZE ACCESS TO POWERSCHOOL FOR ALL COLLEGE AND CAREER PROGRAMMING STAFF.**

  All participants discussed having the ability to obtain a student's academic information through PowerSchool. Only staff members employed by the school, however, can access PowerSchool directly. All college and career service staff employed by an external organization must rely on others to obtain any student-level academic information. This can present a problem if college and career staff need to quickly access information about a student's current or past performance and the staff with access to PowerSchool are absent or unavailable at the time.

  Each college and career service organization should work with partner districts and the NC Department of Public Instruction to gain access to PowerSchool for all of their school-based personnel.

- **CREATE A MONTHLY OR BI-MONTHLY MEETING OF SCHOOL-LEVEL COLLEGE AND CAREER PROGRAMMING STAFF.**

  The overarching goal of these meetings should be to pool the school's many resources in this area to provide students with necessary and exceptional college and career programming. More specifically, these meetings should be used to discuss and plan upcoming events, address necessary issues, and keep all relevant staff informed. Additionally, these meetings should be opportunities to discuss challenges to the group's work and potential solutions, such as how to best serve chronically absent students or improve attendance at FAFSA nights and career fairs. Participants who have instituted these at their school often referenced them as a key way to stay informed about the status of different long-term goals and for planning important school events. This meeting should include school counselors, career development coordinators, WCC career coaches, Upward Bound coordinators, College Advising Corps, and any other staff member providing these services at the school. The timing, regularity, and location of these meetings should prioritize the attendance by all college and career staff members. To that end, it would be helpful to conduct the meeting in-person or virtually at common free times for all college and career staff members.

  Additionally, having an agenda and a staff member to lead the meeting will help make meetings more organized and efficient with time. School administrators and organizational leaders should also encourage attendance to these meetings. To avoid overburdening these staff with excessive meetings, they could be held on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. They could also be in-person or held virtually if this facilitates participation from all college and career staff. These staff can decide if they need to meet more frequently as needed. To fully maximize the benefits of this meeting, attendance is key. Meeting times should be during common free times, and members should avoid scheduling other meetings during this time. School administrators, district personnel, and WCC personnel should allow attendees to this meeting to be exempt from other responsibilities whenever such meetings are held. It may be beneficial for senior staff to lead these meetings and provide an agenda for what should be discussed at the meetings; however, the exact leadership structure of this group should be left up to the school staff and principal to decide.

Conclusion

Efficient and effective documentation and communication are essential given the high number of organizations operating in these schools. Such data and information sharing can take on a variety of forms that are beneficial not only for the organizations and staff working in schools, but also for the students and families navigating an ever more complex post-secondary environment. Creating practices, meetings, or shared documents that allow for active collaboration may be a constructive first step in streamlining inter-organizational communication.

Institutional leadership and organizations have the unique opportunity to collaborate and develop what this interconnectedness looks like within their school and tailor their efforts to align with the needs of students and their organizations. Though the form of shared documentation and regular meetings may be shaped differently, they all will play a pivotal role toward increasing the effectiveness of services that support students' goals.

About the Belk Center

The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, at North Carolina State University, develops and sustains exceptional community college leaders who are committed to advancing equitable college access and student success, the social and economic mobility of their colleges' students, and the economic competitiveness of their regions. The Center provides professional development and research related to current and emerging student success opportunities and challenges facing community college leaders and policymakers in North Carolina and the nation. The Belk Center commits to dismantling systemic barriers to racial equity in education through evidence-based strategies that focus on the outcomes of Black, Latin* and American Indian students (read our full Commitment to Equity here).

About the John M. Belk Endowment

Based in Charlotte, North Carolina, the John M. Belk Endowment is a private family foundation committed to transforming postsecondary educational opportunities to meet North Carolina's evolving workforce needs. Its mission is aligned with the vision of its founder, the late John M. Belk who served four terms as mayor of Charlotte and was CEO of the department store company Belk, Inc. He created the John M. Belk Endowment in 1995 to fund a national merit scholarship program for his beloved alma mater, Davidson College. Now led by Mr. Belk's daughter, MC Belk Pilon, the John M. Belk Endowment continues to partner with innovative, results-oriented programs in North Carolina to further Mr. Belk's values, legacy, and focus on the value of education as a means to personal fulfillment and community vitality. For more information, please visit http://jmbendowment.org.

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Appendix: Methods Detail

Once selected, stakeholders connected the research team with potential participants, who were contacted for availability for interviews and focus groups. Of the 25 potential participants, 18 participated in either a focus group or an interview. School-based employees made up 16 of the participants, and 3 organizations outside of school districts were represented among the participants. The participants varied in their experience level, though most worked in either their school or district prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Qualitative Research Questions:

1. What are the conditions at selected high schools that facilitate or inhibit effective collaboration between college and career access service providers?
2. In what ways do college and career access service providers interact with one another to provide complementary or overlapping services in WCC's public high schools?
3. What gaps might exist in the services provided for students in Ashe, Wilkes, and Alleghany counties?
4. What promising practices help service providers collaborate to supplement and complement college and career access supports in Ashe, Wilkes, and Alleghany counties?
5. What are barriers to the provision of college and career support services in Ashe, Wilkes, and Alleghany counties?
6. What roles do community-based organizations play in providing college and career support in Ashe, Wilkes, and Alleghany counties?
7. How does high school leadership and staff turnover influence the ability of service providers to support students through college and career choices?

Using the projects' research questions, a semi-structured interview protocol was created to be used in each of the interviews with minor changes to questions depending on the individual's position and organization. Stem questions were developed to address one or more of the research questions, with potential probing questions or topics for the interviewer to use as needed. In all, the research team conducted 3 focus groups and 10 interviews virtually via Zoom, each lasting about an hour in length.