



HOW DO WE GET THE WORD OUT?

Findings and Recommendations for Improving Student Engagement for College and Career Service Providers

Introduction

This brief is the third 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 focuses on how these providers can positively impact student and family engagement following the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team collected and analyzed qualitative data in the spring of 2022 from organizations and school staff working in three high schools in the northwest region of the state.

Similar to national trends, student and family disengagement has increased since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the staff interviewed for this project. This last brief in the series not only validates the concerns of these staff members in the findings but recommends ways to build on the practices already instituted to help regain engagement with students and families as the pandemic abates.

Key Points

- School and district leaders and staff reported considerable disengagement from students and families since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants described a difficulty in contacting students and families outside of school, and a diminished effort among many students in their coursework. This disengagement by students resulted in more course failures, increasing the risk of seniors not graduating in comparison to before the pandemic.
- These same staff report the need for greater and more novel approaches for reaching out to students and their families as a way to improve engagement. Across schools, college and career service staff reported trying to reach students and families virtually through social media and conferencing software, such as Zoom.
- College and career services staff also expressed a desire for school leaders and teachers to communicate accurate information about postsecondary and career opportunities to students and families. Having college and career staff inform other school personnel about the services they provide decreases possibilities of miscommunication to students and families.
- Through their interviews, school leaders and staff described student disengagement resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. An assessment of student and family needs could help educators understand students' experiences during this global crisis and present staff with information about how they can best support students.

Data and Methods

This study followed 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. As discussed in Brief 1, the selected schools differ by their student populations and local context, but they share a strong participation in the Career and College Promise program and many of the same college and career service providers. 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

Student and parental engagement in K-12 settings are critical components of academic progress. Parents and guardians are notable sources of emotional, learning, and developmental support for students and can impact their college-going ambitions, academic performance, and school attendance, among other areas. These gains are elevated through student and parental relationships and engagement with schools; this partnership requires school staff to provide meaningful, relevant, and useful opportunities to students and parents in order to support students' learning, success, and development.

Throughout our interviews with college and career staff working with students at Ashe County High School, Alleghany High School, and West Wilkes High School, student and parent engagement were described as important facets of student success. However, forms of engagement have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff mentioned that the pandemic and the associated shifts to remote and virtual learning significantly impacted students' achievement, resulting in increased course failures and drop-out rates and a decline in college and career planning. The pandemic also impacted parents' and guardians' interactions with their students' schools. Staff indicated that students and families lacked motivation to interact with their schools and learning activities, including preparing for their college and career paths. Educators underscored the importance of student and parent engagement in helping to achieve students' goals. They also indicated a desire to provide support services and outreach to families. However, they were often unsure how to do so, particularly as they faced shifting modalities in learning as the result of COVID-19 (i.e., virtual and in-person) and encountered a lack of participation and response from families. Throughout the interviews, educators described the need for more innovative strategies to communicate with, provide intentional support for, and encourage engagement among students and their families.

Recommendations

• COMMUNICATE WITH STUDENTS AND FAMILIES EARLY IN THE ACADEMIC YEAR.

Many participants noted the difficulty they experienced trying to engage with students and families throughout the year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, college and career staff should coordinate with each other to develop and execute a plan for contacting students as early as possible in the academic year. The shared documentation and information system recommended in the first brief of this series would facilitate this activity. Because the day-to-day jobs of these staff may be very busy early in the year, it might be best to try to establish contact with students before the start of the school year. In these early communications, staff should talk to students about changes to their college and career plans and finalizing course enrollments.



These meetings would also be apt opportunities for parents to learn about important events throughout the year, such as specialized PSAT or ACT testing dates and FAFSA nights. Especially for younger students, this outreach could be an opportunity for college and career service staff to build relationships with families and help excite students about postsecondary opportunities. College and career programming staff should share their plans with their school leaders to build buy-in and enlist their help in making families aware of these opportunities. The more flexibility school staff have in terms of how and when they communicate with families can help increase the success of college- and career-related events. For college and career staff working in a 10-month contract, it is recommended school and district leadership attempt to fund their position for an extra month to properly compensate these staff members for communicating with families before the start of the academic year. If districts or schools are unable to fund the extra time for this position, stakeholders should consider this as a policy proposal at the state-level.

- **ENGAGE STUDENTS AND FAMILIES THROUGH FLEXIBLE PROGRAMMING.**

Participants discussed how they connected with students and families in new ways because of the COVID-19 pandemic. College and career staff should build on these experiences and use a variety of methods for delivering information to students and families about college and career programming as the pandemic wanes. This can include in-person programs at more convenient locations in the district, live virtual programs, or pre-recorded online videos. School leaders and WCC administrators should be cognizant of the need for these staff to travel further from their school or work after school hours and allow them to be flexible with other duties as needed.

- **DEVELOP A STREAMLINED AND REGULAR SYSTEM FOR COMMUNICATING INFORMATION ABOUT COLLEGE AND CAREER SERVICES FOR EACH SCHOOL.**

Multiple participants discussed the challenges of miscommunication to their school's families. Consequently, school administrators and college and career programming staff should work together to create a streamlined system to communicate information about programs to students, families, and teachers.

- **Focus group participants specifically highlighted a promising practice for communicating information by providing translated materials and programs for multilingual families.**

Information about college and career programming should be disseminated by college and career services staff to the rest of the school community. Schools should determine the mode of communication that works best for their unique school population. However, it is recommended that a combination of different methods be used to increase the chances of reaching the largest possible audience. Possible cost-effective suggestions include automated phone calls to families, postings on school social media profiles, and letters sent home addresses.



• CONDUCT A NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS AND FAMILIES.

The prevalent view among participants that student and family engagement declined during the COVID-19 pandemic indicates that this is an issue that goes beyond the area of college and career services. To best understand this disengagement, school leaders should work together to conduct a needs assessment of students and their families. The goal of the needs assessment should be to understand the out-of-school contexts of students and families, the attitudes of students towards their academic work, and the impediments students and families have with communicating with school staff. Each school leader should determine which staff should be responsible for creating, disseminating, and analyzing the needs assessment. Full-time staff who regularly communicate with parents and students, like guidance counselors, should be part of the group of staff working on the needs assessment. In addition to the contribution of the needs assessment itself, having a guidance counselor or related college and career services staff member in the working group would ensure they are able to participate and benefit from this process. Considering that family disengagement is an issue, it may yield unsatisfactory results to simply mail the needs assessment home to students and families. Schools should use a variety of methods to get students and families to take the needs assessment.

One possible method is to have students complete one portion of the assessment at school as an online survey, and then parents or guardians can complete a second portion at home or in-person when attending a Parent-Teacher-Student Association meeting, FAFSA night, or another such meeting. Another possibility is to conduct the needs assessment when college and career staff reach out to families prior to the start of the school year. This might allow parents and students time to complete the assessment away from the more hectic schedule of the school year. Though a survey may be the most efficient way to collect a large amount of data, using interviews or focus groups could provide richer information about why this disengagement is occurring. While these methods can take more time to complete, it could be a helpful way to supplement the survey data, and, ultimately, lead to more effective ways to remedy this challenge. An added benefit of conducting a needs assessment is that the relationship between the school and students and families could be strengthened simply by conducting it. If families see that the school is trying to better understand the challenges they may be having at home, they might be more willing to improve their level of engagement with school staff.

Conclusion

In this brief, we highlighted the crucial role that engagement can play in the development of students, parents and guardians, and schools. We reiterate that engagement is a reciprocal relationship among these multiple parties; its success is dependent upon not only the involvement and interest of parents, guardians, and students but also the availability of intentional and dedicated opportunities for engagement offered by educators and schools.

More specifically, programming, communication, and chances to become involved should be effectively and consistently communicated and must be offered in accessible, flexible, and culturally and linguistically relevant formats in order to reach more students and families.

Additionally, conducting a needs assessment could yield useful information for educators about how they can improve their relationships with students and families and also support student learning, growth, and planning for college and career.

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.