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Guest Perspective: Preparation Gaps

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Guest Perspective: Mandy Savitz-Romer



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Realizing the goal of increasing the number of college degrees held by American citizens requires that *all* school-aged students have access to high quality postsecondary counseling beginning no later than middle school and continuing throughout high school and into the summer following graduation. Such postsecondary counseling includes the experiences, information, and relationships that enable students to reflect on their passions and interests, develop postsecondary aspirations and dreams, and acquire the academic, personal and social skills needed to achieve their goals. Yet, we know access to this type of counseling is limited, especially among low-income and first-generation college bound students. While various perspectives exist on what type of change needs to occur to equalize postsecondary opportunity, I contend that guaranteeing that all students, regardless of zip code, have access to postsecondary counseling, can be best accomplished by closing the preparation gap that exists in pre-service and in-service training.

Looking back on my own professional experience as a school counselor, I cannot help but question the adequacy of my own training. Entering a large, urban school district, I was well equipped with counseling skills and an understanding of adolescent development. I entered my first position passionate and excited to promote

educational equity through a career in school counseling. What I lacked, I quickly discovered, was an understanding of how young people come to envision a future for themselves, especially those students otherwise disengaged or off-track in school. Before the forms, the applications, the training programs, and the choices, came the process of helping students understand their passions and future-oriented identities, transmitting labor market trends and the higher education landscape, and engaging students in the processes and behaviors necessary to support their postsecondary goals. Now, as I train and research school counselors and college access professionals, I have witnessed how good intentions and a passion for supporting young people and their post-secondary aspirations bring talented people to this field. We are strong in our caring and committed workforce. However, I have also realized that while good intentions and passion are important, those two qualities are insufficient to tackle this challenge of ensuring that not just some, but all students leave high school with a postsecondary plan. Truly engaging young people in envisioning a future for themselves, creating a pathway to arrive at that destination, and then actually ensuring that they succeed will only happen when we



have people on the front lines – working with students, families, and teachers – whose work is informed by specific college and career readiness competencies.

There is little question that high quality college and career counseling can only happen when we have a knowledgeable and well-trained workforce of professionals working on the front lines. Preparing educators, especially those who will work with students for whom college, or any sort of postsecondary training, feels abstract, foreign, or worse, not for them, requires training – and not just any training. Quality training. Training that comes through professional pathways that prepare individuals for the role and the on-the-job-training that enhances one’s experience. Yet, despite its importance, our current model of training and professional development does not adequately prepare school counselors, and in many cases college access professionals, for the true challenges we face today.

The Preparation Gap

I refer to this lack of training as the Preparation Gap and in fact, there is not just one gap, but rather several gaps in the preparation of school counselors and college access professionals. These gaps appear in pre-service programs, professional development initiatives and existing content areas. I contend that closing these gaps, thereby building a skilled and knowledgeable

group of professionals, holds the greatest promise for creating a stronger workforce to advance postsecondary opportunities for all students.

The Pre-Service Gap

For *school counselors*, whose professional preparation includes a master’s degree, graduate programs and curricula are simply not aligned with the college and career readiness aspects of their role. Few graduate programs require courses in postsecondary counseling and development. And some, operate using outdated modalities that over-emphasize clinical training and underemphasize the specific skills necessary to integrate college and career readiness planning into students’ academic and social development in the context of schools. Moreover, graduate programs rarely arm counselors with leadership skills to prepare them to broker and manage supportive partnerships with community-based organizations. These graduate programs appear out of sync with the college and career demands that are central to school counselors’ work.

For *college access professionals*, or those working to supplement the work of school counselors, challenges include the absence of a professional credential and a lack of clarity regarding standards for the profession. These professionals are hired into these positions following a range of pre-service pathways.

Many host organizations provide robust internal training programs; however, this approach lacks uniformity and is not linked to standards that would otherwise signal quality and readiness. In addition, these trainings rarely cover the type of knowledge necessary to work effectively in school settings, which is necessary to successfully partner and engage with school counselors and other school staff. Without training on this topic, they will be unable to see how their work fits into the public education landscape and how to deliver services to maximize their impact on student outcomes.

The Professional Development Gap

Several studies have illustrated the limited access school counselors have to quality and relevant professional development. For example, school-based in-service is largely focused on teachers and instructional topics, while district-based trainings cover such a wide array of topics attempting to address the multifaceted (or in some cases, poorly defined) school counselor role. And while many professional organizations hold training on college advising, accessibility is compromised due to the cost of training, opportunity costs associated with missing days of work, and even the unwillingness of school-leaders to prioritize the release time needed for school counselors to attend.

As I already mentioned, many non-profit organizations working in the field do provide

robust training for their staff, some of it through on-going professional development. However, at worst, college access programs rely on the assumption that well-intentioned, young professionals who have recently gone through the college application process are capable of coaching others through the process. This over reliance on good intentions is insufficient, especially when one considers the complex array of developmental, academic, and financial challenges faced by first-generation students, students of color, and urban and rural students.

The Content Gap

In both the pre-service and in-service contexts, we also see a gap in appropriate content necessary to engage in college and career readiness counseling. The content currently addressed in college access training and professional development ranges from the Instrumental (how to complete forms and disseminate information) to the Informational (understanding the key steps required to succeed in gaining college admission). There is no question that our advisors and counselors need be trained in concrete tasks such as the specialized practices of FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) completion and policies surrounding undocumented students. However, beyond this, the content of training is inconsistent and frequently misses important topics. For example, trainings must equip practitioners with the cultural competency and proficiency

to counteract educational disparities. Counselors and advisors should be fluent in using data to make decisions about what additional programs are needed in their schools and which students have not benefitted from any additional enrichment support or opportunities. Training should include content that instructs in how to manage school/community-based and business partnerships in ways that complement one another, rather than work in competition.

While these gaps in preparation shed light on our current shortcomings, they simultaneously provide targets for reform. Specific policy reforms should be leveraged including the addition of college readiness competencies to statewide licensure requirements or specific funds for school districts to provide adequate professional development. At the same time, this workforce challenge calls for institutions of higher education to examine their programs and course curricula to ensure they are aligned with the realities of the profession. These new opportunities are of critical importance in building a cadre of professionals who deeply care about educational equity, are uniquely positioned to have an influence on students' planning, and are skilled and knowledgeable based on more than just personal experience. Closing these gaps will require the good will, investments, and dedication of many graduate programs

and non-profit organizations that seek to advance educational opportunity.

The Importance of this New Journal

At a time when our nation is focused on widening postsecondary opportunities to all Americans, it is critical that training and professional development are informed by scholarship that takes into account research and its application to the field of college and career readiness. To date, few journals dedicate their publications to this specific topic of college access, while maintaining a balance between research and applied practice. The introduction of the *Journal of College Access* signals a professionalization for those whose work positions them to directly influence students' college-going orientations, behaviors and choices. I expect this journal will contribute to our professional understanding of which competencies are critical to the profession and will assist the field in moving away from good intentions and toward scientific and developmental theories that guide postsecondary counseling. This, I believe, will ensure that all counselors and their community-based partners can work responsibly and effectively with all young people. 