



5-2024

## Complete Issue

Patrick J. O'Connor PhD

*Oakland Community College*, collegeisyour@comcast.net

Laura Owen

*San Diego State University*, lowen@sdsu.edu

Moya Malcolm

*American University*, mmalcolm@american.edu

Diana Camilo

*California State University, San Bernardino*, diana.camilo@csusb.edu

Christopher W. Tremblay

*University of Michigan*, cwtrem@umich.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca>

 Part of the Higher Education Commons

## Recommended Citation

O'Connor, Patrick J. PhD; Owen, Laura; Malcolm, Moya; Camilo, Diana; and Tremblay, Christopher W. (2024) "Complete Issue," *Journal of College Access*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca/vol9/iss1/1>

This Complete Issue is brought to you for free and open access by the Western Michigan University at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of College Access* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



# Journal of College Access



[scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca)



May 2024 | Volume 9 | Issue 1

# Table of Contents



About the Journal.....	3
Affiliations.....	4
JCA Editorial Board.....	5
Coming Soon: 3 Special Issues.....	6
From the Editors.....	7
School Counselors' Perspectives on Preparing Students Experiencing Homelessness for College..	8-24
Stacey A. Havlik (Villanova University), Dana Brookover (Villanova University), Patrick Rowley (MoodRx.com)	
(Non)cognitive dissonance? A stakeholder-based exploration of the consideration of graduate admissions applicants' personal skills and qualities.....	25-42
Reginald M. Gooch (Educational Testing Service), Joseph H. Paris (Delaware Valley University), Sara B. Haviland (Educational Testing Service), Jose Sotelo (Northwestern University)	
Moving Beyond Transactions: Understanding the Relationships between College Access Professionals and Underrepresented College-Bound Families.....	43-60
Stephany Cuevas (Chapman University)	
Guest Perspective: Master Narrative of College Access Belies Reality for Today's Students .....	61-65
Jonathan S. Lewis (uAspire), René A. Hernandez (Virginia Tech)	
Guest Perspective: From Pre-College Grads to Undergrads: Encouraging Full-Time Enrollment after Summer Programs .....	66-70
Meghan Buckley (Adelphi University)	



# About the Journal



An Overview

The *Journal of College Access* (JCA) focuses on the current trends, research, practices, and development of all types of programs, policies, and activities related to the access of and success in postsecondary education. Issues of college aspiration, qualification, application, enrollment, and persistence are the primary emphases.

The Journal was co-founded by Dr. Patrick O'Connor and Dr. Christopher Tremblay. O'Connor is Chief Strategist and CEO of College is Yours, an organization dedicated to expanding college opportunity. He is a board member and past chair of the Michigan College Access Network (MCAN). Tremblay is Executive Director of Enrollment Management and Student Affairs for the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan.

Launched in March 2014, JCA is a part of Western Michigan University's ScholarWorks, a digital showcase of research, scholarly and creative output.



## CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

We accept submissions year round.

[scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca)





# Affiliations



The *Journal of College Access* is affiliated with the Michigan College Access Network, the Center for Postsecondary Readiness and Success (CPRS) and the Center for Equity and Postsecondary Attainment (CEPA).



MCAN is a statewide non-profit organization with a mission to increase college readiness, participation, and completion in Michigan, particularly among low-income students, first-generation college going students, and students of color.

[micollegeaccess.org](http://micollegeaccess.org)

The goal of the Center for Postsecondary



Readiness and Success is to increase equitable and accessible pathways to postsecondary success for all people. Located at American University in Washington, D.C., the Center creates aligned systems, driven by student outcomes to disseminate new knowledge and discovery of college and career readiness and persistence models, while simultaneously connecting this new knowledge to K-12 and higher education policy formation.

[american.edu/centers/cprs](http://american.edu/centers/cprs)



College of Education

**Center for  
Equity and  
Postsecondary  
Attainment**

The Center for Equity and Postsecondary Attainment (CEPA) focuses on promoting equitable access to viable postsecondary pathways and opportunities. Guided by diverse student and parent perspectives, CEPA aims to create college and career counseling and advising practices that reconnect with and elevate the voices of those who have been historically marginalized and excluded. All students deserve access to high quality guidance that supports both individual and collective needs, challenges inequitable and racist school-based systems and policies, and promotes postsecondary opportunities.

[education.sdsu.edu/cepa](http://education.sdsu.edu/cepa)

# JCA Editorial Board



## Editors in Chief

---

Diana Camilo, Ed.D.  
Assistant Professor  
College of Education Counseling Program  
California State University, San Bernardino

Moya Malcolm, Ph.D.  
Postdoctoral Fellow for Student Success  
School of Education  
American University

Patrick O'Connor, Ph.D.  
Chief Strategist and CEO  
College is Yours

Laura Owen, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
Center for Equity and Postsecondary Attainment  
Department of Counseling and School Psychology  
College of Education  
San Diego State University

Christopher Tremblay, Ed.D.  
Executive Director of Enrollment Management and  
Student Affairs  
Taubman College of Architecture & Urban Planning  
University of Michigan

## Associate Editors

---

Dana Brookover, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Education and Counseling  
Villanova University

Nancy Chae, Ph.D., LCPC, NCC, NCSC, ACS  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Counseling and Marital and Family Therapy  
University of San Diego

David D. Christian, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Counselor Education Program  
College of Education and Health Professions  
University of Arkansas

Kim Cook  
Executive Director  
National College Attainment Network

Beth Gilfillan, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Counselor Education  
Northeastern Illinois University

Erik M. Hines, Ph.D.  
Professor  
Counseling Program  
Division of Child, Family, and Community Engagement  
College of Education and Human Development  
George Mason University

Ian Levy, Ed.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Counseling and Therapy  
Manhattan College

Caroline Lopez-Perry, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
School Counseling  
Co-Director of the CSU Center to Close the Opportunity Gap  
California State University, Long Beach

Robert R. Martinez, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
School Counseling  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



# Coming Soon: 3 Special Issues



We have four special issues in progress focused on these important topics:

## Career Pathways and Social Capital

*Expected May 2025*

This special issue aims to bring together interdisciplinary perspectives to examine how social capital influences career trajectories. Of particular interest are manuscripts that employ an equity lens, delving into the multifaceted realms of diversity and inclusion within the context of career exploration and pathways

*Guest Editors:*

*Claudia Martinez, San Diego State University*

*Lorenzo Sianez, San Diego State University*

## Democratizing Early College and Accelerated Learning for Students of Color

This special issue is focused on broadening access to Gifted and Talented education programs, IB programs, Career Academies, Honors courses, dual enrollment, and early college K-12 schools.

*Guest Editors:*

*Donna Ford, The Ohio State University*

*James L. Moore III, The Ohio State University*

*Erik Hines, George Mason University*

---

## Student Voices

*Artivism for Access - Disrupting the Educational Status Quo*

*Art is a powerful tool to catalyze social change. As historically marginalized populations have fought for access to higher education, they have also changed the culture and dismantled many educational institutional barriers. To mark the 10 year anniversary of the Journal of College Access, the editors invite students to share their thoughts, experiences, and visions related to overcoming obstacles in the pursuit of education through creative expression. This issue will uplift the voices that have been historically silenced such as, but not limited to, BIPOC, first generation, low-income, LGBTQIA+, etc.*

*Guest Editors:*

*Mercedes Albarran, San Diego State University*

*Rocio Zamora, San Diego State University*



# From the Editors



Diana Camilo  
Moya Malcolm  
Patrick O'Connor  
Laura Owen  
Christopher W. Tremblay



**T**his edition of the Journal explores special topics designed to get readers to widen their view of college access.

Havlik et. al. begin this edition with a look at how school counselors help homeless students prepare for the college transition. This is followed by a rare look into the noncognitive factors used in graduate school admissions, where Gooch et al look at an area of admissions that is widely reviewed at the undergraduate level, but less so with graduate programs.

Stephany Cuevas presents a four-part model of communications with under-represented families heading for college that provides a strong framework for admissions offices to consider when reviewing their efforts to recruit nontraditional students. This piece folds nicely into a guest piece by Lewis and Hernandez that takes readers past the traditional college access narrative for many students.

Buckley concludes this issue with a look at the process of helping summer program participants make a successful transition into full-time enrollment.

As the Journal approaches its tenth year of publication, the world of college access continues to offer new challenges and opportunities for advocacy and support. Your observations on this ever-shifting landscape are always welcome. 



# School Counselors' Perspectives on Preparing Students Experiencing Homelessness for College



Authored by  
Stacey A. Havlik (*Villanova University*)  
Dana Brookover (*Villanova University*)  
Patrick Rowley (*MoodRx.com*)

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to investigate school counselors' support of youth experiencing homelessness going to college. Using survey methods, school counselors reported their knowledge, perceived competence, advocacy, and actions related to supporting students experiencing homelessness in their college preparation. The results suggested that training and the number of students experiencing homelessness on counselors' caseloads were significantly related to their knowledge and competence. Knowledge, competence, and advocacy all impacted the number of interventions utilized by participants. The implications of these results for school counselors and counselor educators are discussed.

**Keywords:** homelessness, college readiness, school counseling

Preparing for college is a complicated process by itself. For students experiencing homelessness, however, college preparation presents additional complexities that may require support from a skilled and knowledgeable school counselor. While high school students who experience inconsistent housing are fully capable of going to college and a college degree may be a necessary step to break the cycle of homelessness (SchoolHouse Connection, 2022), they often experience barriers to becoming college-ready, and as such, they are less likely to go to

college than their peers with consistent housing (Chapin Hall, 2019). These challenges include trouble concentrating in school, often due to the lack of having their basic needs met (i.e., food, clothing, and shelter) (Stevens, 2023). Additionally, without a private bedroom or a quiet study space outside of school, along with limited access to academic materials or necessary technology at home (e.g., Wi-Fi, laptop, or art supplies), it can be difficult to complete assignments and homework (Mohan & Shields, 2014). Students experiencing homelessness are also often highly transient, which can lead to higher numbers of absences, and, in turn, their academic achievement is negatively impacted (Chapin Hall, 2019; Tobin, 2014). This makes it especially difficult to keep up with the academic work necessary to pursue postsecondary education.

With challenges often beginning in elementary school, by the time students experiencing homelessness get to high school, they may face pervasive academic gaps that make it difficult to stay in school. One study, for example, which examined academic outcomes for high school students experiencing homelessness, found that only 55% of the participants in the study graduated

## Experiencing homelessness and college going

within four years, with results indicating that one out of five dropped out of high school altogether (Erb-Downward, 2018). To avoid these outcomes and successfully graduate from high school, students experiencing homelessness may need additional academic support and resources, as well as supportive and knowledgeable staff. Supportive teachers and friend groups in particular help high school students experiencing homelessness to graduate (Edwards, 2023). Despite the barriers they face, students experiencing homelessness are fully capable of graduating from high school and becoming college-ready. Research indicates, however, that one out of five youths experiencing homelessness report not receiving educational interventions and resources from service providers, suggesting that they may not be getting the services they need to be set up for success (Chapin Hall, 2019).

School counselors are often the first line of support at a school who can provide interventions and resources to students in unstable housing situations (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2018; Havlik et al., 2018). They have essential roles in advocating for all students to remove barriers that may hinder their ability to be successful in school (Haskins & Singh, 2016). School counselors must be knowledgeable about the needs of students experiencing homelessness and adept at determining which interventions they may need (e.g., individual and small group counseling, academic advising, and teacher and family consultation). Therefore,

the purpose of this study was to investigate how school counselors support the preparation for and transition to college for students experiencing homelessness.

### **The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and Defining Homelessness**

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is federal legislation that authorizes the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program (EHCY) under Title VII-B (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], n.d). To be identified as homeless and to qualify to receive support under EHCY, children and youth must lack a “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, p. 5). This includes:

*Sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations, living in emergency or transitional shelters, or abandoned in hospitals; having a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings; living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; or migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described above* (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, p. 5).

## Experiencing homelessness and college going

According to the NCHE (2021b), over 350,000 high school students (grades nine through 12) in 2019-2020 were identified as homeless. To support this large number of students, EHCY requires public schools to remove barriers to enrollment, attendance, and success for students experiencing homelessness. Under EHCY, students experiencing homelessness have the right to remain at their school of origin—even if they move out of the district due to homelessness, enroll in a new school immediately while waiting on required enrollment paperwork (e.g., immunization records, academic reports, etc.), receive transportation to and from school, and access services (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Schools are also required to identify a local liaison who ensures that the guidance is being followed. Liaisons report that school counselors are one of the most important stakeholders in the school who can help them to identify youth experiencing homelessness (Ingram et al., 2017).

### **School Counseling for Students Experiencing Homelessness**

School counselors are key stakeholders who can partner with students experiencing homelessness to address their diverse needs by providing services across academic, social/emotional, and career domains (ASCA, 2019a). They facilitate an array of indirect and direct services across pre-K through 12th-grade settings (ASCA, 2019b). Direct services include individual and group counseling, as well as classroom lessons to meet the developmental needs of students across their

caseload. They support the mission of their school and provide fundamental, evidence-based support by collaborating with stakeholders across the school, family, and community. School counselors in secondary settings play key roles in advising students in their college and career planning and ensuring that they are ready to transition seamlessly into fulfilling post-secondary pathways (ASCA, 2019b). They design interventions that encourage students to have the mindset “that postsecondary education and lifelong learning are necessary for long-term success” (Category 1: M.6; ASCA, 2021).

Specific to their roles with students experiencing homelessness, school counselors collaborate with other stakeholders to remove barriers. They advocate for students experiencing homelessness to ensure they are getting their needs under McKinney-Vento met, including removing barriers to school attendance and enrollment, and ensuring appropriate placement in classes (ASCA, 2018). They also provide information to other stakeholders about McKinney-Vento and establish preventative programs for youth experiencing homelessness (ASCA, 2018). In their college counseling roles with students experiencing homelessness, school counselors report providing individualized support to youth planning for college and advocating for admissions decisions by building relationships with offices of admissions and financial aid, as well as assisting in other important ways to remove barriers (e.g., coordinating transportation to college visits and helping students seeking fee waivers;

## Experiencing homelessness and college going

Havlik & Duckhorn, 2020). School counselors have such an important role in supporting the college preparation of homeless youth that they are specifically highlighted in the EHCY program (section 722(g)(1)(K)) as being responsible, in part, for providing tailored support for youth experiencing homelessness going to college. Through collaborating with liaisons, they provide “individualized counseling regarding college readiness, college selection, the application process, financial aid, and the availability of on-campus supports” (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, p. 51).

Recent qualitative research suggests that school counselors are meeting these college preparatory roles, by supporting youth experiencing homelessness through interventions designed to enhance their college access (Havlik et al., 2021). Havlik et al.’s (2021) research found that school counselors align with EHCY by providing individualized college-going support for students, including career exploration, and assisting students one-on-one to complete financial aid paperwork and verify their homeless status. While this research is promising in that it highlights the important work of school counselors supporting youth experiencing homelessness, contradictory evidence suggests that two-thirds of students experiencing homelessness report not feeling comfortable talking to individuals at their school about the barriers and challenges of homelessness (Ingram et al., 2017). Only 42% of students experiencing homelessness in one study reported feeling like their schools

effectively prepared them for college (Ingram et al., 2017). Furthermore, school counselors report feeling helpless and ill-prepared to work with students experiencing homelessness (Havlik et al., 2018), suggesting that they do not feel competent to engage in this necessary work.

### Purpose of the Study

With very few studies having been conducted that examine school counselors’ work with students experiencing homelessness regarding college (Havlik et al., 2021), more expansive data is needed on school counselors’ knowledge of homelessness and perceptions of how they engage in college preparation work with students experiencing homelessness. This information will guide future preparation of school counselors to enhance their college counseling work with students experiencing homelessness. Thus, this study aims to investigate the preparation, knowledge, and interventions of school counselors supporting youth experiencing homelessness in preparing for and transitioning to college. The research questions addressed in this study include:

RQ1. What is the type and frequency of interventions that school counselors utilize to support the college transition for students experiencing homelessness?

RQ2. What are the relationships between demographic variables, years of experience, number of students experiencing homelessness and training and school

## Experiencing homelessness and college going

counselors' perceived competence, level of advocacy, knowledge, and perceptions of preparation to support students experiencing homelessness going to college?

RQ3. How are school counselors' perceived competence, level of advocacy, knowledge, and perceptions of preparation related to frequency of interventions that high school counselors engage in to support students experiencing homelessness going to college?

### Method

This study was approved by a university institutional review board. Through survey methods, we examined relationships between school counselor variables in supporting students experiencing homelessness going to college. Web surveys were sent out to school counselors across the United States through multiple means.

### Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using a Qualtrics web survey. With the target population being school counselors who are working with students experiencing homelessness preparing for college, the researchers recruited broadly to capture a representative sample. This was accomplished by using non-probability, convenience sampling via several different means (Etikan et al., 2016). Convenience sampling was chosen for this study because it is difficult to identify which school counselors had students experiencing homelessness on their caseloads and have provided college preparation work

with them, thus, the researchers broadly sent the recruitment materials out through various means to locate targeted participants.

Emails with the consent form and survey link were first sent to approximately 1,000 individuals who were identified as high school counselors in the ASCA directory (which is accessible to members), as well as to known contacts. Next, the research team emailed the survey request to contacts of state school counseling associations to request that they share the survey with their members. Approximately five state association representatives responded that they would send out the email to their members. A Google search was also conducted to identify email addresses of school counselors who lived in areas that had high numbers of students experiencing homelessness. With cities having higher numbers of public students experiencing homelessness (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), the research team targeted large metropolitan areas (e.g., Baltimore, Chicago, Philadelphia, New York) and conducted Google searches to identify email addresses of school counselors who lived in those areas. Lastly, the link was posted to the researchers' social media pages (e.g., LinkedIn and Twitter) and shared amongst their colleagues and contacts. Researchers estimate that the survey was available to well over 5,000 school counselors; however, the response rate is unknown due to not knowing exactly how many prospective participants received the email. Out of the group who did receive it, it was not possible to know how many of them were qualified to



## Experiencing homelessness and college going

take the survey (i.e., having worked with homeless students on college preparation).

### Participants

With more than 111,000 school counselors nationwide (Sullivan, 2019) the researchers estimated that there are approximately 37,000 high school counselors across the country. At a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error, that suggests that an ideal representative sample size for all high school counselors would be 381. Since not all high schools have students experiencing homelessness on their caseloads and there is no data publicly available indicating the exact number of counselors who do, the estimated sample size number is estimated to be lower than 381.

The survey respondents included 162 school counselors working in the United States. Reported gender identities included female ( $n = 129$ , 80%), male ( $n = 30$ , 19%), and other ( $n = 2$ , 1%). One participant chose not to respond regarding gender identity. Ethnicity included 148 participants indicating they are non-Hispanic/Latine and 14 participants indicating they identify as Hispanic or Latine. Self-reported race of the participants included: White/Caucasian ( $n = 115$ , 71%), Black or African American ( $n = 30$ , 18.5%), American Indian or Alaskan Native ( $n = 6$ , 3.7%), Asian ( $n = 4$ , 2.5%), and another race ( $n = 7$ , 4.3%). Participants were situated across all four regions of the United States, as identified in the U.S. Census: Northeast, Midwest, West, and South.

The average years of experience reported was 12 years. Participants were asked to provide the number of students experiencing homelessness on their caseload; however, with the item being open-ended, it was difficult to calculate an exact mean. Several participants wrote that they “did not know” or provided a range. For those who provided a number, the average number of students experiencing homelessness on participant caseloads was 14.83. Approximately 23% of the participants reported that they did not receive any training on homelessness ( $n = 38$ ). Among those participants who reported receiving training, participants (who could mark multiple formats) noted having received training in graduate school ( $n = 10$ ), in-service training while at work ( $n = 52$ ), required professional development ( $n = 29$ ), voluntary professional development ( $n = 22$ ), and “other” ( $n = 13$ ).

### Instruments

The survey used in this study consisted of 61 items, divided into five sections. The first section included four items from the Perceived Competence Scale. This scale assesses a participants’ feelings of competence and can be tailored to any given topic—in this case, items focused on perceived competence of providing college readiness support (Williams et al., 1998). Possible scores range from 4-28, with higher scores indicating higher levels of perceived competence. An example item on the Perceived Competence scale was, “I feel confident in my ability to help students experiencing homelessness

## Experiencing homelessness and college going

prepare to be successful in college.” For the current sample, the range was 4-28 and the mean response score was 19.30 ( $\alpha = .949$ ,  $SD = 4.6$ ).

Next, the School Counselor Advocacy Assessment (Haskins & Singh, 2016) instrument was utilized to measure school counselors’ perceived competence in advocacy. This scale has 19 items, with possible total scores ranging from 19-95, with higher scores indicating a greater level of perceived level of engagement in advocacy work. Example items from this scale included, “I join with allies to change oppressive structure in schools” and “I develop plans of action for confronting barriers.” For the current sample,  $\alpha = .910$ , with a range of scores from 36-94, and a mean score of 67.61 ( $SD = 10.41$ ).

The third section was the Knowledge and Skills with Homeless Students Scale (KSHSS; Havlik & Bryan, 2015). Several items were modified to focus on college preparation. There are 12 total items on the scale, with a possible range of scores from 12-60, with higher scores indicating a greater level of knowledge and preparation. Sample items included, “I can identify the students who are homeless on my caseload” and “I had sufficient training to work with students who are homeless.” For the current sample,  $\alpha = .643$ , with a range of scores from 27-58, and a mean score of 42.17 ( $SD = 5.39$ ).

Finally, the survey included items focusing on specific interventions ( $n = 16$ ; see Table 1 on page 15) and then demographics ( $n = 14$ ), including age, gender identity, years of experience as a school counselor, years in current position, number of students on their caseload who are experiencing homelessness, and training to work with students experiencing homelessness.

### Data Analysis

The researchers utilized a nonexperimental, correlational survey design. Research question one (RQ1) was analyzed using descriptive statistics, to understand the type and frequency of interventions participants engage in to support students experiencing homelessness. The researchers ran three multiple regressions to investigate research question two (RQ2). This is fitting because multiple regressions explore the relationship between one continuous dependent variable and several independent variables. School counselor characteristics were the independent variables for the multiple regression analyses, and the dependent variables were the three scales: (a) perceived competence, (b) level of advocacy, and (c) knowledge and perceptions of preparation. Finally, research question three (RQ3) was investigated with three Pearson product-moment coefficients, to display the relationship between the three constructs and frequency of interventions to support students experiencing homelessness. IBM SPSS (Version 23) was used for statistical analyses.

## Experiencing homelessness and college going

### Results

The aim of this study was to examine how school counselors are supporting the preparation for and transition to college for students experiencing homelessness. To address RQ1, descriptive statistics provided information on the type and frequency of various interventions that participants engage in to support the college transition for students experiencing homelessness. Table 1 on page 15 contains frequency data for the 16 intervention items. Each intervention has been utilized by some of the participants to varying degrees. The three most common interventions were: a) academic counseling/advising (95.7%); b) individual college counseling/advising (93.3%); and c) community partnerships (89%). The three least commonly used interventions were: a) providing workshops and training for administrators (51.2% of the sample never utilizing); b) providing workshops and training for teachers (51.9% never); and c) providing funding to meet basic needs (37.7% never).

Next, to investigate RQ2, the researchers ran three multiple regressions to assess the impact of school counselor variables on three outcome variables: (a) perceived competence for learning, (b) level of advocacy, and (c) knowledge and perceptions of preparation for working with students experiencing homelessness. Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedastic for each

of the three multiple regressions.

The first regression explored the impact of school counselor variables on perceived competence for learning, as measured by the Perceived Competence Scale. The overall model was statistically significant ( $F(6, 154) = 3.756, p < .01, R^2 = .128$ ) and accounted for 12.8% of the variance in school counselor perceived competence. Number of students experiencing homelessness ( $\beta = .169, p < .05$ ), training ( $\beta = -.229, p < .01$ ), and gender of school counselor (i.e., with men reporting higher perceived competence than women) ( $\beta = .161, p < .05$ ) were statistically significant predictors of perceived competence for learning. Years of experience in school counseling, years of experience in current position, and race/ethnicity were not statistically significant predictors. Results of the multiple regression are presented in Table 2 on page 16.

The second regression explored the impact of school counselor variables on advocacy, as measured by the School Counselor Advocacy Assessment (Haskins & Singh, 2016). The overall model was not statistically significant,  $F(6, 154) = 1.428, p = .207$ .

The third regression explored the impact of school counselor variables on perceived knowledge and perceptions of preparation as measured by Knowledge and Skills with Homeless Students Scale (Havlik & Bryan, 2015). The overall model was statistically significant ( $F(6, 154) = 10.385, p < 0.001, R^2 = .288$ ) and accounted for 28.8% of the

## Experiencing homelessness and college going

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics on Participant (n = 162) Intervention Engagement

Intervention	No	Yes
Parent Consultation and Education	23 (14.2%)	139 (85.8%)
Partnerships across secondary and postsecondary settings	22 (13.6%)	140 (86.4%)
Community Partnerships	18 (11.1%)	144 (88.9%)
Mentoring programs	43 (26.5%)	119 (73.5%)
Bridge programs	46 (28.4%)	116 (71.6%)
Academic counseling and advising	7 (4.3%)	155 (95.7%)
Individualized college counseling and advising	11 (6.8%)	151 (93.2%)
Small group college counseling and advising	37 (22.8%)	125 (77.2%)
Large group college counseling and advising	34 (21%)	128 (79%)
Tutoring services	46 (28.4%)	116 (71.6%)
Providing workshops and trainings for teachers	78 (48.1%)	84 (51.9%)
Providing workshops and trainings for administrators	83 (51.2%)	79 (48.8%)
Connecting students to internships/apprenticeships	38 (23.5%)	124 (76.5%)
Providing housing support	45 (27.8%)	117 (72.2%)
Providing funding to meet basic needs	61 (37.7%)	101 (62.3%)
Providing donated professional clothing	47 (29%)	115 (71%)

## Experiencing homelessness and college going

Table 2  
Regression with Perceived Competence Scale as the Outcome

Predictor variables	B	t	sr
Gender identity	.161	2.124*	.16
Race	-.018	-.239	-.018
Years experience, current	.005	.051	.004
Years experience, total	.148	1.536	.116
Number of students experiencing homelessness	.169	2.222*	.167
Received training	-.229	-3.027**	-.228
Model R	.357		
Model R <sup>2</sup>	.128**		
Model Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.094**		

Note. sr = partial correlation.

\*p < .05

\*\*p < .01

variance in school counselor knowledge and perceptions of preparation. Two variables showed significance of the outcome, which was training (beta = -.503,  $p < .001$ ) and number of students experiencing homelessness (beta = .145,  $p < .05$ ). Years of experience in school counseling, years of experience in current position, gender identity, and race/ethnicity were not statistically significant predictors. Results of the multiple regression are presented in Table 3 on page 17.

Finally, to answer RQ3, three correlations are presented. The relationship between perceived competence (as measured by the Perceived Competence Scale) and the number

of interventions used (out of 16 total possible interventions for students experiencing homelessness) was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. There was a medium, positive correlation between the two variables,  $r = .389$ ,  $n = 162$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a higher level of perceived competence associated with higher numbers of interventions utilized.

After assessing preliminary analyses, another correlation was run to examine the relationship between perceived knowledge and perceptions of preparation (as measured



## Experiencing homelessness and college going

Table 3

Regression with Perceived Knowledge and Preparation as the Outcome

Predictor variables	B	t	sr
Gender identity	.018	.266	.018
Race	-.018	-.262	-.018
Years experience, current	.018	.204	.014
Years experience, total	.067	.770	.052
Number of students	.145	2.113*	.144
Received training	-.503	-7.354**	-.500
Model R	.537		
Model R <sup>2</sup>	.288**		
Model Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.260**		

Note. sr = partial correlation.

\*p<.05,

\*\*p<.01

by Knowledge and Skills with Homeless Students Scale) and number of interventions used. There was a medium to strong, positive correlation between the two variables,  $r = .490$ ,  $n = 162$ ,  $p < .001$ . This resulted in a higher level of perceived knowledge and perceptions of preparation associated with higher numbers of interventions utilized.

A final correlational analysis examined the relationship between perceived level of advocacy and number of interventions. After checking preliminary analyses, a medium to strong, positive correlation between the two variables was found,  $r = .490$ ,  $n = 162$ ,  $p < .001$ , with higher level of perceived advocacy

associated with higher numbers of interventions utilized.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how school counselors support the preparation for and transition to college for students experiencing homelessness. We examined the frequency of interventions and relationships between participants' preparation, knowledge, perceived competence, and advocacy skills when working with students experiencing homelessness. The results indicated that practicing school counselors engage in a

## Experiencing homelessness and college going

multitude of direct and indirect counseling interventions to varying degrees and revealed several significant relationships between school counselor demographic variables, preparation, knowledge, perceived competence, and frequency of interventions.

The participants reported providing college preparation support in myriad ways. For instance, they reported engaging in many of the important interventions that are aligned with the expected roles of school counselors (ASCA, 2019a) in their work with students experiencing homelessness (ASCA, 2018). For instance, they rated themselves highly on frequently delivering direct services through individual and small-group counseling. The most frequently reported service included individual direct interventions; academic counseling and advising. The participants' self-report of individual interventions with students is positive, but Ingram (2017) found students often do not feel comfortable speaking to school staff about their homelessness. Thus, there is a chance students are not opening up about issues specific to homelessness with their school counselors in these sessions.

With McKinney-Vento recommending that counselors provide tailored college readiness support, this suggests that they are, to some extent, providing individualized support (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). A high number of participants also report collaborating with guardians and other school personnel, as well as engaging in preventative partnerships (e.g., bridge or mentorship

programs) to support youth going to college, which aligns with best practices for supporting youth experiencing homelessness (NCHE, 2021a) and the ASCA (2018) position statement on the role of school counselors and homelessness. Engaging in such partnerships echoes previous research indicating the important role of school counselors in building relationships with colleges and community partners to remove barriers for students experiencing homelessness in their journey to postsecondary education (Havlik & Duckhorn, 2020).

The three least utilized interventions included: (a) providing workshops and training for administrators, (b) providing workshops and training for teachers, and (c) providing funding to meet basic needs. The role of school counselors in working with youth experiencing homelessness requires them to be knowledgeable about homelessness so that they can educate others (ASCA, 2018). Thus, this is an area where they seem to be falling short. Providing professional development to other school staff aligns with collaborating with school personnel to benefit students (ASCA, 2018). This finding may be explained by other research suggesting school staff generally do not receive sufficient training to support students experiencing homelessness (Ingram et al., 2017). Thus, the participants may not feel competent to provide such training. Finally, students experiencing homelessness face barriers in addressing their basic needs (Havlik et al., 2018), which fall under the social determinants of health. Social

## Experiencing homelessness and college going

determinants of health are the living conditions and the wider set of forces and systems that influence daily life, such as economic stability, including housing security and food security (World Health Organization, 2020). School counselors are qualified to address social determinants of health in their work, and thus, can make this a priority (Johnson & Brookover, 2021).

Through identifying community resources and building partnerships, they can ensure students' needs are identified and met.

Next, the researchers examined the impact of school counselor variables on three outcome variables: (a) perceived competence for learning, (b) knowledge and perceptions of preparation for working with students experiencing homelessness, and (c)

level of advocacy. Findings showed school counselors who received training to work with students experiencing homelessness and those with higher numbers of students experiencing homelessness, rated themselves higher on perceived competence. Years of experiences was notably not significant. This result suggests that the more training in supporting students experiencing homelessness going to college a school counselor participates in and the higher

numbers of students experiencing homelessness on their caseloads, the more confident and knowledgeable they are in their work with these students, supporting the need for specialized training in this topic. This is an important result, as school counselors are often the first line of support for equitable college readiness resources, but report feeling helpless and ill-prepared to work with

students experiencing homelessness (Havlik et al., 2018), further highlighting the need for training.

Second, this finding suggests that school counselors who have exposure to higher numbers of students on their caseload who are homeless have higher levels feelings of competence, hence higher self-efficacy and self-perceived ability in this work. The finding aligns

with self-efficacy research, in that experiential learning (in this case, working directly with youth with inconsistent housing) can lead to increased self-efficacy (Lent & Brown, 1996); so, while time spent in the school counseling field or in a particular position was not significant, the results suggest that training and exposure are important for school counselors confidence in their work with youth experiencing homelessness.



**“Findings showed school counselors who received training to work with students experiencing homelessness and those with higher numbers of students experiencing homelessness, rated themselves higher on perceived competence.”**

## Experiencing homelessness and college going

The participants who received more training on homelessness also rated themselves higher on perceived knowledge and perceptions of preparation. This can be interpreted as, those participants who received specific training on working with students experiencing homelessness were more likely to rate their education and training on the topic “sufficient” than those who did not.

Participants who did receive training also reported higher levels of knowledge surrounding the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and its requirements, as related to their positions, suggesting that training is important in ensuring that school counselors know how to identify and support youth who are homeless. The ASCA (2018) position statement calls for school counselors to attain legal knowledge surrounding homeless parents and children, including the McKinney-Vento Act; importantly, specific training increases the likelihood of this.

Though no school counselor variables were significantly predictive of advocacy levels, the study found that perceived advocacy was positively correlated with the number of interventions used. Thus, school counselors who rated themselves higher on the advocacy scale, reported increased engagement in interventions. With advocacy work being an integral aspect of school counselors’ roles (Haskins & Singh, 2016), it is not surprising that school counselors who are stronger advocates for youth would recognize the need to engage in increased support for youth who are experiencing homelessness.

Lastly, the researchers examined how participants’ self-reported perceived competence, and knowledge/preparation were related to the frequency of the interventions they engaged in to support students experiencing homelessness and college readiness. Both perceptions were positively, significantly correlated with the frequency of interventions. This can be interpreted as, the more a participant perceived themselves as self-efficacious, knowledgeable, and well-trained in supporting students experiencing homelessness about college, the greater number of interventions tailored for this specific population they would facilitate. Given the important role school counselors have in supporting students experiencing homelessness (ASCA, 2018) and how a college degree can have immense positive impacts on breaking the cycle of homelessness, strengthening factors which promote school counselors’ intentional work in supporting students experiencing homelessness going to college are crucial (SchoolHouse Connection, 2022).

### Implications for School Counselors

This study highlighted the importance of training school counselors to work with students experiencing homelessness. It showed that training and direct work with increased numbers of students experiencing homelessness seems more important than demographic factors such as the number of students experiencing homelessness or years of experience in the school counseling field.

## Experiencing homelessness and college going

Thus, school counselors who work with youth experiencing homelessness must seek training to learn more about the McKinney-Vento Act and how they can best support youth experiencing housing insecurity in their schools. They can do this by connecting with their homeless liaison or state coordinator of homeless services, or through connecting to resources such as the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) or the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE). Further, with advocacy being correlated with the number of interventions provided, having an advocacy-mindset seems particularly important for school counselors who work with youth experiencing homelessness. School counselors can advocate on the institutional level by ensuring that students experiencing homelessness have equitable access to necessary resources (Leibowitz-Nelson et al., 2020). One way to advocate is by connecting families experiencing homelessness to supportive individuals such as counselors, liaisons, or stakeholders in the community who can provide the necessary interventions to meet students' basic needs (Leibowitz-Nelson et al., 2020).

### Limitations and Future Research Directions


There are several limitations to this study. First, the survey was sent out using different methods, including listservs, which can have any number of recipients. This made it impossible to calculate the response rate. Further, the final number of participants was smaller than desired because, despite using

multiple means, it was difficult to recruit participants. Many survey responses were not included in the final analysis because the participants only partially completed the surveys. Participants who responded tended to have a relatively high number of years of experience (an average of 12 years). As such, it is hypothesized that prospective participants who did not feel qualified to complete the survey due to limited work specifically with youth experiencing homelessness or limited work experience in general may have chosen not to complete it. Additionally, the use of convenience sampling can lead to bias within the sample. Thus, the results may not be representative of the wider population of school counselors (Etikan et al., 2016). Despite the challenges, this study expands on current research and offers important recommendations for future research on school counselors.

In terms of future research, with training being an important indicator of school counselors' involvement with students experiencing homelessness, examining the types of training provided and efficacy of these approaches is an important next step. With school counselors needing regular professional development on an array of topics, future research could explore time-efficient tools for preparing school counselors to work with youth experiencing homelessness. The results also indicated that school counselors reported less frequent engagement in training of staff and parents. Thus, exploring the types of training provided and who is providing this training is another



## Experiencing homelessness and college going

area of inquiry. Lastly, gender was shown as a significant variable related to perceived competence, with men reporting higher than women. Because the number of female participants was much higher than male, more research is needed with a better-balanced sample to explore this finding. 

### REFERENCES

- American School Counselor Association. (2021). ASCA student standards; Mindsets and behaviors for student success. Alexandria, VA: American School Counselor Association.
- American School Counselor Association. (2019a). ASCA national model: A framework for school counseling programs (4th ed.). Alexandria, VA: American School Counselor Association.
- American School Counselor Association. (2019b). The essential role of high school counselors. American School Counselor Association. <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/2a38ea99-5595-4e6d-b9af-2ac3a00fa8c3/Why-High-School.pdf>.
- American School Counselor Association. (2018). The school counselor and children experiencing homelessness. <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/Standards-Positions/Position-Statements/ASCA-Position-Statements/The-School-Counselor-and-Children-Experiencing-Hom>
- Chapin Hall (2019, November 4). New study shows youth who experience homelessness less likely to attend college. Chapin Hall. Retrieved November 1, 2022, from <https://www.chapinhall.org/news/new-study-shows-youth-who-experience-homelessness-less-likely-to-attend-college/>
- Edwards, E. J. (2023). Hidden success: Learning from the counternarratives of high school graduates impacted by student homelessness. *Urban Education*, 58(4), 559–585. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085919877928>
- Erb-Downward, J. (2018). Falling through the cracks: Graduation and dropout rates among Michigan's homeless high school students. *Poverty Solutions*, University of Michigan. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED594027>
- Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, 5(1), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11>.
- Haskins, N. H., & Singh, A. (2016). Advocacy competency of school counselors: An exploratory factor analysis. *Professional School Counseling*, 20(1). <https://doi.org/10.5330/1096-2409-20.1.149>
- Havlik, S., & Bryan, J. (2015). Addressing the needs of students experiencing homelessness: School counselor preparation. *The Professional School Counselor*, 5(2), 200–216. <https://doi.org/10.15241/sh.5.2.200>
- Havlik S., & Duckhorn, M. (2020). Supporting high students experiencing homelessness going to college: Perspectives of local liaisons. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory, & Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025120980371>.
- Havlik, S., Duckhorn, M., Rohrer, S., & Rowley, P. (2021). From homeless to student housing: School counselor roles and experiences in preparing students experiencing homelessness for college. *Professional School Counseling*, 25(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759x211050412>
- Havlik, S., Neason, E., Puckett, J., Rowley, P., & Wilson, G. (2018). "Do whatever you can to try to support that kid": School counselors' experiences addressing student homelessness. *Professional School Counseling*, 21(1), 47–59. <https://doi.org/10.5330/1096-2409-21.1.47>
- Ingram, E. S., Bridgeland, J. M., Reed, B., & Atwell, M. (2017). Hidden in plain Sight: Homeless students in America's public schools. *Civic Enterprises*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED572753>
- Johnson, K. F., & Brookover, D. L. (2021). School counselors' knowledge, actions, and recommendations for addressing social determinants of health with students, families, and in Communities. *Professional School Counseling*, 25(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759x20985847>
- Leibowitz-Nelson, S. B., Baker, S. B., & Nassar, S. C. (2020). Multicultural and social justice counseling competencies: Institutional interventions for professional school counselors. *Journal of Counselor Leadership and Advocacy*, 7(1), 42–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2326716X.2020.1727384>
- Lent, R. W., & Brown, S. D. (1996). Social cognitive approach to career development: An overview. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 44(4), 310–321. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.1996.tb00448.x>

## Experiencing homelessness and college going

Mohan, E., & Shields, C. M. (2014). The voices behind the numbers: Understanding the experiences of homeless students. *Critical Questions in Education*, 5(3), 189-202.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). Student homelessness in urban, suburban, town, and rural districts. NCES Blog. <https://nces.ed.gov/blogs/nces/post/student-homelessness-in-urban-suburban-town-and-rural-districts>

National Center for Homeless Education. (2021a). School counselor supports for college preparation and readiness for students experiencing homelessness. <https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/counselor-brief.pdf>

National Center for Homeless Education. (2021b). Student homelessness in America: School years 2017-2018 to 2019-2020. <https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Student-Homelessness-in-America-2021.pdf>

National Center for Homeless Education. (n.d.). The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. NCHE. Retrieved October 19, 2022, from <https://nche.ed.gov/legislation/mckinney-vento/>

SchoolHouse Connection. (2022). Youth homelessness and higher education: An overview. [schoolhouseconnection.org/youth-homelessness-and-higher-education-an-overview/](https://schoolhouseconnection.org/youth-homelessness-and-higher-education-an-overview/)

Stevens, W. (2023). Youth and young adult homelessness: Options to improve access to services. National Conference of State Legislatures. <https://www.ncsl.org/human-services/youth-and-young-adult-homelessness-options-to-improve-access-to-services#:~:text=With%20their%20basic%20needs%20such,jobs%20and%20become%20self%2Dsufficient.>

Sullivan, E. T. (2019, September 19). Student-to-counselor ratios are dangerously high. Here's how two districts are tackling it. EdSurge. <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2019-09-19-counselor-to-student-ratios-are-dangerously-high-here-s-how-two-districts-are-tackling-it>

Tobin, K. J. (2014). Homeless students and academic achievement. *Urban Education*, 51(2), 197–220. doi: 10.1177/0042085914543116

United States Department of Education. (2018). Education for homeless children and youths' program: Non-regulatory guidance. <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2020/07/160240ehcyguidanceupdated082718.pdf>

Williams, G. C., Freedman, Z. R., & Deci, E. L. (1998). Supporting autonomy to motivate patients with diabetes for glucose control. *Diabetes Care*, 21(10), 1644–1651. <https://doi.org/10.2337/diacare.21.10.1644>

World Health Organization. (2020). Social determinants of health. [https://www.who.int/health-topics/social-determinants-of-health#tab%tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/social-determinants-of-health#tab%tab_1)

# (Non)cognitive dissonance? A stakeholder-based exploration of the consideration of graduate admissions applicants' personal skills and qualities



Authored by  
Reginald M. Gooch (*Educational Testing Service*)  
Joseph H. Paris (*Delaware Valley University*)  
Sara B. Haviland (*Educational Testing Service*)  
Jose Sotelo (*Northwestern University*)

## ABSTRACT

Prospective graduate students' noncognitive attributes are commonly evaluated as a part of a holistic review of their admission applications. Yet it is difficult to determine which noncognitive attributes are considered by those who evaluate graduate admissions applications and what approaches they take to measure applicants' noncognitive attributes. It is even less clear to what degree prospective graduate students understand how they are evaluated for graduate admissions and how the evaluation of their noncognitive attributes factor into admissions decisions. Drawing on surveys of graduate enrollment management (GEM) professionals and prospective graduate students in the United States, our study investigated the noncognitive attributes prospective graduate students and GEM professionals deem important to success in graduate school and the application components each group believes demonstrate those attributes. Results suggest that some alignment exists between the perspectives of prospective graduate students and GEM professionals on the noncognitive attributes most important for completing a graduate program of study. We share recommendations for improving the agreement between prospective graduate students and GEM professionals including the need for more explicit and transparent communication about how graduate admissions applications are evaluated, which is of particular importance as admissions processes forgo the consideration of applicants' race.

**Keywords:** noncognitive, graduate enrollment management, higher education, graduate admissions, equity

Graduate programs have long used measures of applicants' academic preparedness such as undergraduate grade point average (GPA) and standardized admissions tests (e.g., GRE) to gauge the likelihood that applicants will succeed in graduate school (Michel et al., 2019). Yet, the field of graduate admissions is undergoing significant change, particularly following the U.S. Supreme Court rulings ending race-conscious admissions (*Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard College*, 2017; *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina*, 2022). These rulings necessitate reimagining how graduate admission applicants are evaluated, including the ways in which application components are used and the implications of their use for equity and fairness in the graduate admissions process.

Undergraduate GPA and admissions test scores have been shown to predict graduate student success including first year graduate GPA (Darolia et al., 2014; Klieger et al., 2014; Kuncel et al., 2001; Kuncel et al., 2010; Liu et al., 2016; Schwager et al., 2015), scores on comprehensive exams (Dunlap et al., 1998; Hatchett et al., 2017; LeCrom et al., 2016), and faculty ratings of graduate student

## (Non)cognitive dissonance

performance (Kuncel et al., 2001). Yet, particularly in recent years, noncognitive factors have also gained importance as part of holistic review. Kent and McCarthy (2016) refer to holistic review as “a growing strategy for widening the evidence base that graduate programs consider when evaluating a candidate for admissions” (p. iii). Today, most admissions officers report that holistic review is practiced at their institution (Bastedo et al., 2018; Haviland et al., 2023). Some applicant qualities that graduate programs consider through the holistic review process include academic preparedness, demonstrated interest in a program or field of study, research experience, and noncognitive skills such as perseverance (Michel et al., 2019; Paris, Birnbaum, et al., 2024).

There are several arguments that support the consideration of graduate admissions applicants’ noncognitive attributes. Social and emotional skills, for example, are perceived as important for graduate school success (Kent & McCarthy, 2016; Kyllonen et al., 2005; Pacheco et al., 2015; Sowbel & Miller, 2015; Ward, 2007) and contribute to the statistical prediction of graduate school success (e.g., degree completion) when combined with graduate admissions test scores (Kuncel et al., 2001). Including noncognitive factors such as motivation, creativity, and attitude as part of a holistic review may both promote fairness and contribute incremental predictive power for academic outcomes in graduate school (Kuncel et al., 2001; Kyllonen et al., 2005; Niessen et al., 2017; Paris, Birnbaum, et al.,

2024) beyond the consideration of undergraduate GPA and admissions test scores alone.

The consideration of noncognitive attributes may become increasingly important as admissions practices at both the graduate and undergraduate levels are reshaped upon the U.S. Supreme Court’s rulings ending race-conscious admissions in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard College* (2017) and *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina* (2022). In U.S. states where affirmative action has previously been eliminated from college admissions, the most common admissions strategies that have been adopted use holistic review or a “top percent” policy under which a percentage of applicants at the top of their graduating high school classes are guaranteed admission to undergraduate institutions (Bleemer, 2023). The use of a top percent plan for graduate admission is unlikely due to the specialized nature of graduate programs, but should graduate programs increasingly rely on holistic review as a tool to build diverse classes of students, the importance of applicants’ noncognitive factors will only increase. In the coming years, institutions will likely look to states such as California and Texas, which previously moved away from race-conscious admissions, to find novel solutions as well to improve upon those states’ outcomes. For example, California observed a decline in underrepresented minority (URM) student undergraduate and graduate degree attainment following the end

## (Non)cognitive dissonance

of race-based affirmative action in admissions, leading to exacerbated socioeconomic inequality (Bleemer, 2022). Measuring applicants' noncognitive attributes is one avenue for exploration as institutions grapple with mandated changes and develop solutions (Knox, 2023; Paris et al., 2023). There is a degree of consensus regarding the importance of noncognitive factors for predicting applicants' success in graduate school. Yet, questions persist regarding how noncognitive factors should be measured and considered in the graduate admissions process in practice. Tools that are commonly used to assess noncognitive factors, such as personal statements and letters of recommendation, for example, may contribute to bias toward applicants from higher income backgrounds (Chetty et al., 2023) and therefore may be unreliable predictors of academic success (Kuncel et al., 2014; Miller, Crede & Sotala, 2021; Rosinger et al., 2021; Woo et al., 2022). At many institutions, graduate admissions is a decentralized function (i.e., applications are evaluated by individual graduate programs rather than by an institution-wide graduate school or graduate admissions office), and there is no standardized process for evaluating applicants' noncognitive attributes, or even which noncognitive factors to consider among an "almost limitless" pool of options (Zwick, 2019, p. 131). Furthermore, noncognitive factors encompass a range of personal skills and qualities that may have varying impact on graduate student success (e.g., degree completion) and how programs

understand and value these skills may vary (Walpole et al., 2002). For example, it is unclear how admissions officers evaluate noncognitive factors within application components such as personal statements and letters of recommendations, personal interviews, or situational judgement tests (Patterson et al., 2016).

In short, noncognitive factors have become increasingly important to the graduate admissions process and are likely to grow in importance. Yet it is difficult to know how the factors themselves are defined, which factors are more or less important to graduate programs, how those factors are evaluated, and whether evaluative criteria and methodologies are valid and reliable. Given the high-stakes nature of graduate admissions and the need for a clear and consistent understanding of holistic review practices, it is important to explore how applicants are impacted by the evolving landscape of graduate admissions. For example, do prospective graduate students understand what criteria and methodologies programs use to evaluate their applications? The opacity of the graduate admissions process can create confusion among some students (Paris, Haviland, et al., 2024). Additionally, there is a lack of research that investigates applicants' understanding of the graduate admissions system (Chari & Potvin, 2019), including their knowledge of how noncognitive factors are assessed.



## (Non)cognitive dissonance

Our study addressed this gap in understanding by exploring whether applicants understand the criteria by which they are evaluated for graduate admission. Using a survey of graduate enrollment management (GEM) professionals (e.g., admissions officers, directors of admissions), we examined which personal skills and qualities they believe are associated with applicants' potential for success in graduate school, and how those skills and qualities are demonstrated through the materials applicants submit. We also asked undergraduate senior-year students the same questions and compared the answers of the two groups to illuminate commonalities and points of divergence. We conclude by discussing implications for equity and fairness in graduate admissions practices.

### Methods

To understand the perspectives of GEM professionals and students on the importance of applicants' noncognitive attributes for success in graduate school, we conducted two national surveys. We administered the first survey to prospective graduate applicants from 46 U.S. states (hereinafter the "student survey"). Survey respondents (hereinafter "students") were recruited through an online crowd-sourcing platform. We piloted the study with 50 students, then administered it to an additional 250 students, receiving a total of 300 responses from undergraduate senior-year students interested in pursuing graduate education (see Table 1 on next page for descriptive statistics). Eighty-one percent

( $n = 243$ ) of students had interest in pursuing a master's degree, and 19% ( $n = 57$ ) had interest in pursuing a doctoral degree, roughly reflecting the proportion of master's (82%) and doctoral degree holders (18%) among the U.S. population of graduate degree holders (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

We administered a second survey to GEM professionals (hereinafter the "GEM survey") through email invitations to the membership of NAGAP, the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management. The survey was administered as part of a longitudinal study conducted by disseminating pulse surveys to NAGAP members (e.g., see Haviland et al. (2022)). We received a total of 167 responses among the 1,387 members contacted, for a response rate of 12%. This response rate is greater than prior studies using NAGAP members as the population (e.g., Haviland et al., 2022; Paris, 2021; Paris & Winfield, 2024). Most respondents worked at large (10,000+ students enrolled) or medium (3,000-9,999 students enrolled) institutions. Of our sample, 45 participants did not provide the specific name of the institution at which they worked. The remaining 122 participants provided the name of 113 distinct institutions. We limited our sample to a maximum of three participants from a given institution. In the case that more than three respondents from one institution responded to the survey, three responses were chosen at random to avoid oversampling that institution. Our study, including the survey instruments, was approved by an institutional review board (IRB).

## (Non)cognitive dissonance

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics of Participants (N = 300)

	<i>n</i>	Percentage
<b>Race</b>		
Asian	48	16.0
Black	26	8.7
White	183	61.0
Mixed	29	9.7
Other	14	4.7
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	192	64.0
Male	107	35.6
Other (Non-binary, self-describe, prefer not to respond)	1	0.3

Students and GEM professionals were asked parallel questions that forced them to rank the top three personal skills or qualities from a list of nine that they believed were important for students' ability to complete a graduate program of study. The nine personal skills and qualities included perseverance/resiliency, leadership, creativity, collaboration, responsibility/self-discipline, curiosity, even-temperedness, sociability, and organization. The personal skills and qualities were drawn from a subset of the attributes defined in the ETS Personal Skills and Qualities (PSQ) tool, a measure of Big Five Personality factors (Kyllonen, 2008; Kyllonen et al., 2005; Kyllonen & Tan, 2023a). To reduce survey length and increase usability, we merged conceptually similar skills and qualities (perseverance and resiliency, responsibility and self-discipline) to reduce the total number of items to nine that the respondents considered. Responsibility and self-discipline are part of the same dimension (Self-Regulations) in PSQ validation studies

and are significantly correlated ( $r = .83$ ). Perseverance and responsibility are not part of the same dimension in the PSQ but are significantly correlated in PSQ validation studies ( $r = .36$ ) and various other literatures (Salisu, 2020). Respondents were not provided with operational definitions of these nine constructs but rather responded to the survey based on their own understanding of the terms. The constructs were presented in this manner to reduce respondent burden and confusion in considering a lengthy list of skills, qualities, and definitions. However, interested readers can find descriptions of the constructs in the Appendix. We associated graduate student success with degree completion as Okahana et al. (2018) found that participants across fields and areas of program focus consistently noted degree completion (i.e., the percentage of students completing a degree within a specific time frame) as a definition of graduate student success. Given the exploratory nature of our study, we analyzed the survey data using

## (Non)cognitive dissonance

descriptive and summary statistics. We present the proportion of our two samples that selected each of the nine personal skills for success in graduate school as most important. Participants could select up to three skills or qualities and therefore proportions exceed 100%.

of greatest importance were responsibility/self-discipline and perseverance/resiliency, with 79% and 72% of participants choosing these qualities, respectively. Organization and curiosity were the third and fourth most frequently selected qualities, with 37% and 32% of participants choosing those qualities, respectively. The three qualities least selected were leadership (19%), sociability (11%), and even-temperedness (4%).

Table 2  
Frequency of Noncognitive Factors Selected by Prospective Graduate Students

Quality	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Responsibility/Self-discipline	236	78.7
Perseverance/Resiliency	216	72.0
Organization	110	36.7
Curiosity	95	31.7
Collaboration	75	25.0
Creativeness	64	21.3
Leadership	58	19.3
Sociability	33	11.0
Even-temperedness	13	4.3

Note. Cumulative percentage exceeds 100% as participants were able to select multiple responses.

## Results

Table 2 presents the top personal skills or qualities that prospective graduate students selected when asked to select the top three that were most important for students' ability to complete a graduate program of study.

Our full sample of 300 participants from the student survey answered the question, selecting 900 skills and qualities in total. The two qualities that most students thought were

Table 3 (next page) presents the top three personal skills or qualities that GEM professionals thought were important to complete a graduate program of study. Our total sample of 167 participants answered the question, selecting a total of 501 skills or qualities. The two qualities that GEM professionals thought were most important were responsibility/self-discipline and perseverance/resiliency with 81% and 80% of participants choosing these qualities, respectively. Collaboration and curiosity were the third and fourth most selected qualities with 39% and 36% of participants choosing those qualities, respectively. Less commonly

## (Non)cognitive dissonance

Table 3

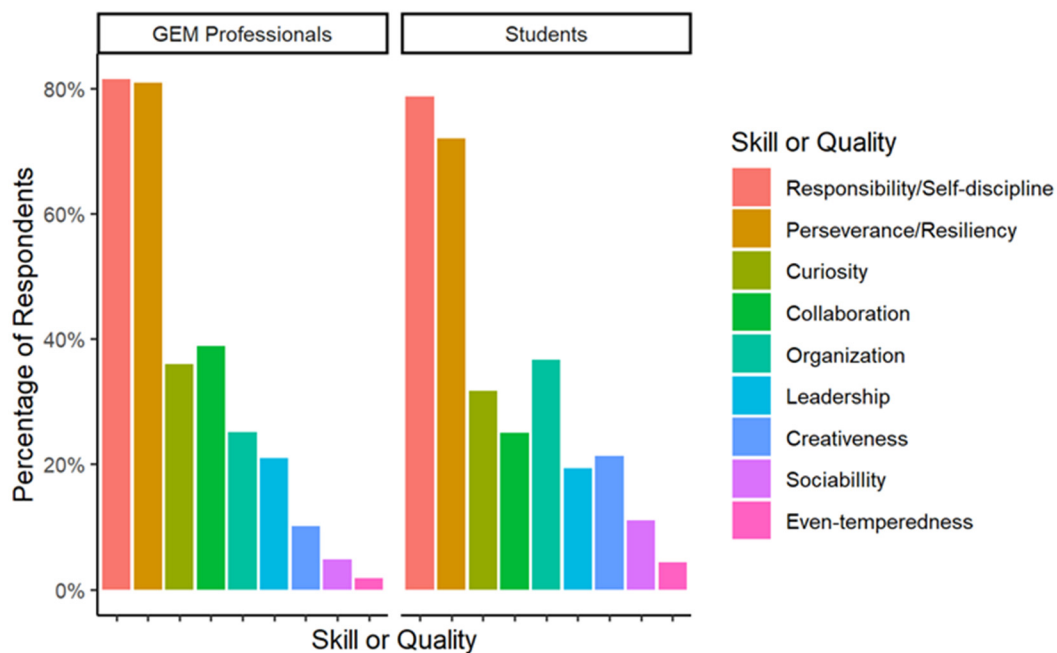
Frequency of Non-cognitive Factors Selected by GEM Professionals

Quality	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Responsibility/Self-discipline	136	81.4
Perseverance/Resiliency	135	80.8
Collaboration	65	38.9
Curiosity	60	35.9
Organization	42	25.1
Leadership	35	21.0
Creativity	17	10.2
Sociability	8	4.8
Even-temperedness	3	1.8

Note. Cumulative percentage exceeds 100%, as participants were able to select multiple responses.

Figure 1

Important Personal Skills and Qualities for Success in Graduate School



Note. Students (N = 300), GEM professionals (N = 167)

## (Non)cognitive dissonance

selected were organization (25%), leadership (21%), creativeness (10%), sociability (5%), and even-temperedness (2%).

Figure 1 (previous page) presents a side-by-side comparison of students' and GEM professionals' reported importance of applicants' skills and qualities for completing a graduate program of study. For both groups, responsibility/self-discipline was the most important quality and perseverance/resiliency was the second most important quality.

### **Do Student Views of the Importance of Noncognitive Attributes Align with Those of GEM Professionals?**

Students and GEM professionals agreed that responsibility/self-discipline and perseverance/resiliency were the most important skills and qualities for completing a graduate program of study. Our finding suggests that students and GEM professionals appear to believe that perseverance would be similarly beneficial for success in graduate school. However, it is unclear from these data alone whether students are making the same assumptions as GEM professionals are about how they can demonstrate this important trait through their application packet. To understand this issue, we asked respondents on both surveys to indicate which common application packet components could demonstrate this trait in a graduate school applicant.

### **Similarities in Application Components that Demonstrate Perseverance and Resiliency**

Students and GEM professionals primarily agreed about which application components they believe demonstrate applicants' perseverance and resiliency (see Figure 2 on next page). For example, both groups selected the same top two application components they believe demonstrate these traits: personal statements and letters of recommendation. The most chosen component in both samples was personal statements, which was selected by 72% of students and 92% of GEM professionals, while letters of recommendation was selected by 60% of students and 81% of GEM professionals as components that demonstrate applicants' perseverance and resiliency.

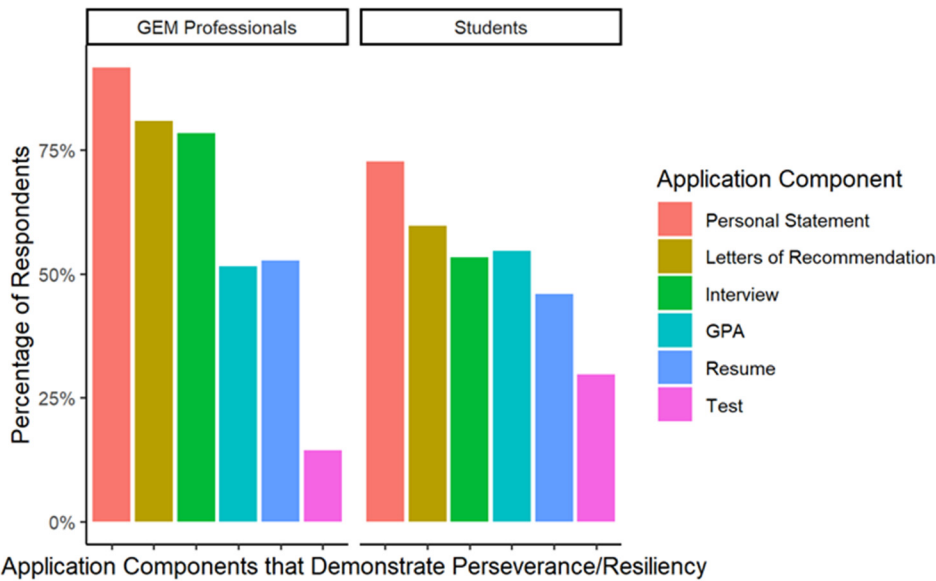
### **Inconsistency Among the Application Components that Demonstrate Responsibility and Self-Discipline**

Contrary to the pattern that we observed with students' and GEM professionals' perspectives on perseverance and resiliency, students and GEM professionals did not share the same level of agreement regarding the application components that they believed best demonstrate applicants' responsibility and self-discipline. Students indicated that GPA (75%), letters of recommendation (69%), and standardized test scores (61%) were the application components that best demonstrate applicants' responsibility/self-discipline whereas GEM professionals reported that letters of recommendation (81%), personal statements (73%), and GPA (71%) were the application components that best demonstrate



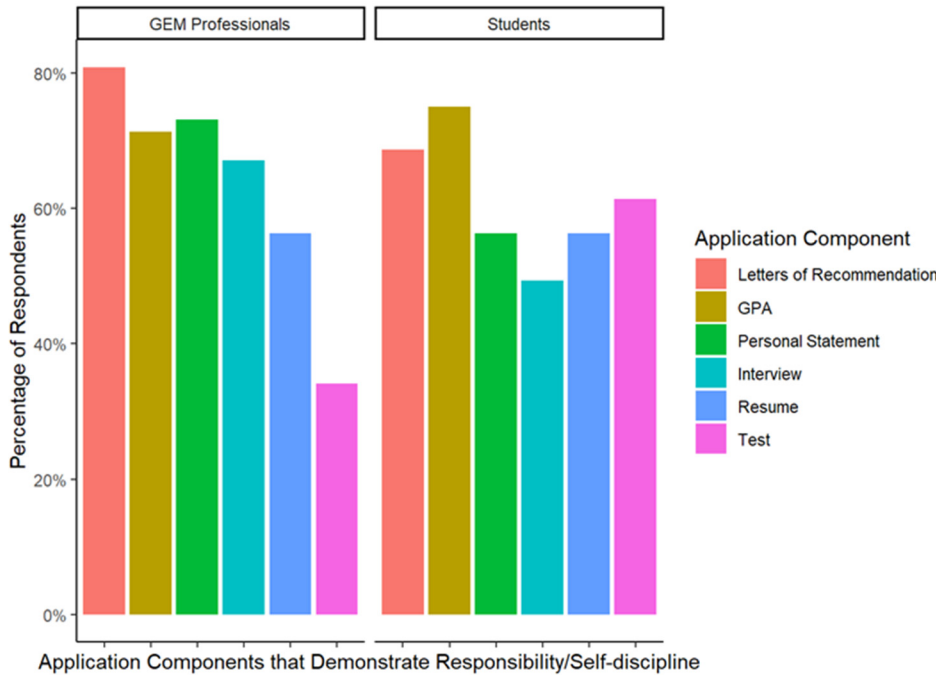
(Non)cognitive dissonance

Figure 2  
Application Components That Demonstrate Perseverance and Resiliency



Note. Students (N = 300), GEM professionals (N = 167)

Figure 3  
Application Components That Demonstrate Responsibility and Self-discipline



Note. (N=300), GEM professionals (N=167)

## (Non)cognitive dissonance

these skills and qualities. Figure 3 (previous page) presents these results. Although responsibility/self-discipline was selected as the most important skill or quality for degree completion by both groups, our findings suggest that students may attempt to demonstrate that they possess these attributes in a different manner than what may be evaluated or expected by GEM professionals.

### Inconsistent Alignment Among the Skills and Qualities of Less Importance

Although students and GEM professionals agreed that responsibility and self-discipline were the most important applicant qualities for graduate degree completion, there was less consistency in the reported importance of other qualities. Yet there is a clear second tier of desirable skills and qualities, each of which was ranked between third and fifth most important by both groups. These qualities included collaboration, curiosity, and organization. The perspectives of students and GEM professionals were misaligned within this tier, however, as students indicated that organization was more important for degree completion than the level of importance reported by GEM professionals. Conversely, GEM professionals reported that collaboration was more important for degree completion compared to the level of importance reported by students. Students reported that leadership was more important for graduate degree completion compared to the level of importance reported by GEM professionals. Conversely, GEM professionals indicated that creativity was

more important for degree completion than the level of importance reported by students. Students and GEM professionals generally agreed on the importance of sociability and even-temperedness, both of which were reported to be least important for completing a graduate program of study.

## Discussion and Recommendations

Generally, there was alignment between students' and GEM professionals' views on the relative importance of the personal skills/qualities represented in this survey. Students and GEM professionals agreed that responsibility/self-discipline and perseverance/resiliency are the two most important skills and qualities for completing a graduate program of study. Aligned perspectives on the importance of these qualities presents a mutually beneficial scenario; applicants can better ensure the materials they submit reflect the skills and qualities graduate programs seek, while GEM professionals receive more pertinent information about their applicants and can therefore make more informed admission decisions. Our findings extend prior literature that associates postsecondary educational achievement and success outcomes with the Big 5 personality factor of conscientiousness (Kuncel et al., 2014; Nofle & Robbins, 2007; O'Connor & Paunonen, 2007; Poropat, 2009; Trapmann et al., 2007). In particular, the "proactive" (e.g., hard-working, persistent) aspect of conscientiousness, which aligns with perseverance, has been shown to be

## (Non)cognitive dissonance

predictive of undergraduate graduation outcomes and GPA (Burks et al., 2015). Yet more can be done to ensure that similar views are not merely artifacts of chance or of similar social and cultural perspectives. Despite consistent viewpoints between students and GEM professionals, barriers may prevent applicants from demonstrating the skills and qualities graduate programs value. For example, although 72% of students reported perseverance/resiliency as an important quality, 28% did not. While some students may be aware that qualities such as perseverance or resiliency are desirable, other students may not know which qualities to demonstrate or may be unsure how to best demonstrate those important qualities in their application materials. Since it is uncommon for graduate programs to explicitly state the noncognitive factors they evaluate, our findings are noteworthy given the (1) observed alignment between the skills and qualities students and GEM professionals deem important, and (2) misalignment between how each group perceives these skills and qualities are demonstrated. Yet, even where alignment occurs, students may attempt to express their qualities in ways that are unnoticed or unappreciated by reviewers. Future research should investigate potential group differences in these alignments as group differences across student demographic characteristics have potentially concerning implications for equitable access to graduate education.

If a quality such as perseverance/resiliency is important to many graduate programs, especially if it is used as a criterion to evaluate applicants, making this information publicly available to applicants would increase fairness. For example, specific information pertaining to the criteria, qualifications, and applicant qualities a graduate school or program expects or finds important for success among qualified applicants should be explicitly stated on graduate admissions and program webpages (Sotelo et al., 2023). Such practices can increase transparency, benefiting applicants and graduate programs. A necessary first step toward enhancing transparency is for graduate programs to seek internal clarity and agreement about their own priorities. For example, program faculty members and administrators might engage in discussions about the skills and qualities they value most among students, especially when such skills and qualities are aligned with the institutional or programmatic mission. Once identified and operationally defined, programs can formalize how they plan to measure the skills and qualities within the materials applicants submit. One such approach is to confirm that personal statement prompts align with the skills and qualities that the program values and intends to measure using a given application component. For example, if a program intends to learn about an applicant's resiliency, the personal statement prompt should be structured in a way that allows applicants to describe their experiences overcoming adversity. Using a rubric, as recommended by the Council of Graduate

## (Non)cognitive dissonance

Schools (Kent & McCarthy, 2016), is another best practice that can help promote more consistent evaluations of admissions applications. Aligning priorities and strategy in a principled manner could not only increase internal consistency in how candidates are evaluated but could also increase transparency and fairness through greater equality of access to information and mitigate the deleterious effects of hidden

curriculum (Roland & Bukoski, 2024; Margolis & Romero, 1998).

Additionally, the emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) presents potential opportunities to enhance consistency and efficiency in evaluating applicants' personal qualities, but "may inadvertently penalize already disadvantaged subgroups when used in high-stakes settings" (Lira et al., 2023, p. 1).

Increasing transparency is a step toward equity, as members of underrepresented minority groups often lack access to informational resources on graduate school admissions, contributing to disparate admissions outcomes (Roland & Bukoski, 2024; Woo et al., 2022). In the absence of clear signals from graduate programs, applicants may make assumptions about the relative

importance of various skills based on their own cultural background and values (Chari & Potvin, 2019) which could differ from what graduate programs value. For example, a student may choose to emphasize a skill such as organization which may not be deemed as highly important by a graduate program as the student assumes from their own background and experiences.



**"Our findings highlight the importance of efforts to enhance the alignment between graduate admissions criteria and evaluative methodologies and how applicants demonstrate their personal skills and qualities through the components of their application."**

Our findings highlight the importance of efforts to enhance the alignment between graduate admissions criteria and evaluative methodologies and how applicants demonstrate their personal skills and qualities through the components of their application. Explicitly stating to prospective students how GEM professionals plan to evaluate a key personal quality such as perseverance/resiliency

or responsibility/self-discipline is an important next step. Through their application pages, graduate schools or programs could make clear to prospective students that a given quality is evaluated through letters of recommendation or through a personal statement. Explicitly articulating the qualities and skills that are important to a given graduate program and informing

## (Non)cognitive dissonance

prospective students how their application materials demonstrate those qualities would allow prospective students to focus on the information graduate programs consider when preparing their admissions materials (Sotelo et al., 2023) and could improve the validity of those instruments (see Kuncel et al., 2014). Providing guidance about what the school or program considers among the non-academic credentials it seeks could help to offset some of the advantage that high-income students typically have in demonstrating these characteristics (Chetty et al., 2023). Articulating the skills and qualities that are important to a graduate program would also signal to applicants that skills and qualities not listed are of lesser importance or may not be considered. Doing so would help prevent applicants from focusing their efforts on demonstrating strengths that may be unimportant to or not considered by their intended graduate program. For example, prospective students may prepare application materials that highlight their even-temperedness or sociability. However, those traits may not be highly desired by their intended graduate program. Similarly, if it is made explicit in the application instructions how graduate programs expect applicants to demonstrate certain skills or qualities, prospective students could avoid the mistake of assuming that they have sufficiently demonstrated those skills or qualities elsewhere in their application. Furthermore, providing more information about the personal qualities and skills that are valued by a graduate program could benefit

applicants by helping them determine the extent to which a given program values their strengths (Sotelo et al., 2023). Providing this information can benefit graduate programs as well as students. For example, institutions may attract prospective students who might not otherwise have applied, but whose self-conceptions of their strengths or values align with those valued by the program (Sung & Yang, 2008).

Graduate programs wishing to reduce subjectivity and bias in the admissions process could also consider alternatives to learning about students' noncognitive attributes through traditional application packet components such as personal essays or letters of recommendation, which are not particularly strong predictors of graduate school performance (Kuncel et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2021; Rosinger et al., 2021; Woo et al., 2022). These components may also be biased against underserved populations (Chetty et al., 2023). Institutions may consider alternative measures such as a direct skills assessment of desired noncognitive attributes. Measures of noncognitive attributes typically have smaller score gaps across racial and ethnic groups than other measures such as cognitive tests, while contributing to the prediction of success in educational settings (Kalsbeek et al., 2013; Klieger et al., 2022; Sackett et al., 2001). Although coaching or faking can be a concern in such assessments, a direct assessment of noncognitive attributes using a forced-choice method may offset such concerns across various graduate school contexts (e.g., see Kyllonen & Tan, 2022a;




## (Non)cognitive dissonance

Kyllonen & Tan, 2022b; Kyllonen & Tan, 2022c). With the role of noncognitive attributes in graduate admissions only likely to increase in the future, it is crucial that graduate schools and programs carefully consider how to incorporate the consideration of those attributes into their admissions processes in a principled way. Now, more than ever, is a time for graduate programs to take care regarding issues of equity in admissions.

### Limitations

Our study is limited by the nature of our samples. Both our surveys may be subject to self-selection bias. In the case of the GEM professionals survey, an invitation to complete the survey was sent to all NAGAP members, and those who are particularly interested in test-optional or holistic admissions may have been more likely to respond and who may have a different profile from the population of NAGAP members. Similarly, to ensure the demographic and geographic representativeness of our student sample, we recruited student participants through a crowd-sourcing platform. Students who agreed to participate in research studies through the platform also self-selected to participate in our study. Therefore, our samples may differ from the general population in terms of factors such as their motivation, limiting the generalizability of our results. Future research could use a random sampling technique to mitigate the potential effects of self-selection bias.

In our analyses, we did not examine subgroup differences, which may obscure our results, particularly if operational definitions of personal skills and qualities differ across demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age, ability, race), type of graduate program (e.g., MBA vs. Ph.D.), or student intended graduate program. Future research can address this limitation by collecting in-depth demographic data on participants supporting subgroup analysis to determine if any groups are at a particular disadvantage in the current admissions environment. Research determining if and how expectations differ by field would further help guide prospective graduate students as they navigate the admissions process.

Finally, in an effort to maintain the readability of our survey, we did not provide participants with operational definitions of the PSQ components, but instead relied on their own interpretations of the terms. This is not uncommon in survey research, but given the nature of these terms, there may be imprecisions; these interpretations may have varied between participants, which could affect our findings. This study aimed to explore how different stakeholder groups valued these skills and qualities, and where they believed these skills and qualities were expressed in the graduate application. Future research should explore the notions of what these skills entail, as well as why and how they are believed to contribute to student success. It may also consider other skills and qualities that may be of interest to graduate programs but were excluded from our analysis, such as critical thinking. 

### REFERENCES

- Bastedo, M. N., Bowman, N. A., Glasener, K. M., & Kelly, J. L. (2018). What are we talking about when we talk about holistic review? Selective college admissions and its effects on low-SES students. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 89(5), 782–805. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2018.1442633>
- Bleemer, Z. (2023). Affirmative Action and Its Race-Neutral Alternatives. *Journal of Public Economics*, 220. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2023.104839>
- Burks, S. V., Lewis, C., Kivi, P. A., Wiener, A., Anderson, J. E., Götte, L., DeYoung, C. G., & Rustichini, A. (2015). Cognitive skills, personality, and economic preferences in collegiate success. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 115, 30-44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2015.01.007>
- Chari, D., & Potvin, G. (2019). Understanding the importance of graduate admissions criteria according to prospective graduate students. *Physical Review Physics Education Research*, 15(2), 023101. <https://doi.org/10.1103/PhysRevPhysEducRes.15.023101>
- Chetty, R., Deming, D., & Friedman, J. (2023). Diversifying society's leaders? The determinants and causal effects of admission to high selective private colleges (No. w31495). National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Darolia, R., Ptochnick, S., & Menifield, C. (2014). Assessing admission criteria for early and midcareer students from a U.S. MPA program. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 22, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v22.1599>
- Dunlap, K., Henley, H., & Fraser, M. (1998). The relationship between admissions criteria and academic performance in an MSW program. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 34(3), 455-464. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.1998.10778939>
- Haviland, S. B., Walker, M., Cho-Baker, S., Zhitong, Y., & James, K. (2022). Test-optional admissions practices in the COVID-19 era. (Research Notes). ETS.
- Haviland, S. B., Paris, J. H., Gooch, R. M., & Sotelo, J. (2023). What's now and what's next in graduate admissions policies: Results from the ETS/NAGAP 2022 Admissions Survey. (Research Notes). ETS.
- Hatchett, G. T., Lawrence, C., & Coaston, S. C. (2017). Re-examination of traditional admissions criteria in predicting academic success in a counselor education program. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling*, 39, 70–81. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-016-9283-6>
- Kalsbeek, D., Sandlin, M., & Sedlacek, W. (2013). Employing noncognitive variables to improve admissions, and increase student diversity and retention. *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly*, 1(2), 132-150.
- Kent, J. D., & McCarthy, M. T. (2016). Holistic review in graduate admissions: A report from the council of graduate schools. Council of Graduate Schools.
- Klieger, D.M., Bochenek, J., Ezzo, C., Holtzman, S., Cline, F., & Olivera-Aguilar, M. (2022). Using third-party evaluations to assess socioemotional skills in graduate and professional school admissions. *International Journal of Testing* 22(1), 72-99. [10.1080/15305058.2021.2019748](https://doi.org/10.1080/15305058.2021.2019748)
- Klieger, D. M., Cline, F. A., Holtzman, S. L., Minsky, J. L., & Lorenz, F. (2014). New perspectives on the validity of the GRE® General Test for predicting graduate school grades (GRE Research Report No. GRE-14-03). Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.
- Knox, L. (2023, July 28). NACAC acquires character collaborative. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/quick-takes/2023/07/28/nacac-acquires-character-collaborative>
- Kuncel, N. R., Kochevar, R. J., & Ones, D. S. (2014). A meta-analysis of letters of recommendation in college and graduate admissions: Reasons for hope. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 22(1), 101-107. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsa.12060>
- Kuncel, N. R., Hezlett, S. A., & Ones, D. S. (2001). A comprehensive meta-analysis of the predictive validity of the graduate record examinations: Implications for graduate student selection and performance. *Psychological Bulletin*, 127(1), 162-181. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.127.1.162>
- Kuncel, N. R., Wee S., Serafin, L., & Hezlett, S. A. (2010). The validity of the graduate record examination for master's and doctoral programs: A meta-analytic investigation. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 70, 340-352. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013164409344508>
- Kyllonen, P. C. (2008). The research behind the ETS personal potential index (PPI). (ETS Research Brief Series). ETS. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=5dd2d8d1510b605975dfc27dc16e632043e5168e>
- Kyllonen, P. C. & Tan, A. (2022a). PSQ pilot validity report: Health sciences program. ETS.

## (Non)cognitive dissonance

- Kyllonen, P. C. & Tan, A. (2022b). PSQ pilot validity report: Business school. ETS.
- Kyllonen, P. C. & Tan, A. (2022c). PSQ pilot validity report: Law school. ETS.
- Kyllonen, P. C., Walters, A. M., & Kaufman, J. C. (2005). Noncognitive constructs and their assessment in graduate education: A review. *Educational Assessment*, 10(3), 153-184.
- LeCrom, C., Rufer, L., Slavich, M., Dwyer, B., & Greenhalgh, G. (2016). Exploring predictors of graduate school and career success: A case study in sport management. *College Student Journal*, 50, 513-530.
- Lira, B., Gardner, M., Quirk, A., Stone, C., Rao, A., Ungar, L., ... & Duckworth, A. L. (2023). Using artificial intelligence to assess personal qualities in college admissions. *Science Advances*, 9(41), eadg9405. <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adg9405>
- Liu, O. L., Klieger, D. M., Bochenek, J. L., Holtzman, S. L., & Xu, J. (2016). An investigation of the use and predictive validity of scores from the GRE® revised General Test in a Singaporean university (GRE Research Report No. GRE-16-01). Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ets2.12095>
- Margolis, E., & Romero, M. (1998). "The department is very male, very white, very old, and very conservative": The functioning of the hidden curriculum in graduate sociology departments. *Harvard Educational Review*, 68(1), 1-33. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.68.1.1q3828348783j851>
- Michel, R. S., Belur, V., Naemi, B., & Kell, H. J. (2019). Graduate admissions practices: A targeted review of the literature. ETS research report series, 2019(1), 1-18.
- Miller, A., Crede, M., & Sotala, L. K. (2021) Should research experience be used for selection into graduate school: A discussion and meta-analytic synthesis of the available evidence. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 29(1), 19-28.
- Niessen, A. S. M., Meijer, R. R., & Tendeiro, J. N. (2017). Measuring non-cognitive predictors in high-stakes contexts: The effect of self-presentation on self-report instruments used in admission to higher education. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 106, 183-189.
- Noftle, E. E., & Robins, R. W. (2007). Personality predictors of academic outcomes: Big five correlates of GPA and SAT scores. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 93(1), 116. <https://doi/10.1037/0022-3514.93.1.116>
- O'Connor, M. C., & Paunonen, S. V. (2007). Big Five personality predictors of post-secondary academic performance. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 43(5), 971-990.
- Okahana, H., Augustine, R. M., & Zhou, E. (2018). Master's admissions: Transparency, guidance, and training. Washington, D.C.: Council of Graduate Schools.
- Pacheco, W. I., Noel, R. J., Porter, J. T., & Appleyard, C. B. (2015). Beyond the GRE: Using a composite score to predict the success of Puerto Rican students in a biomedical PhD program. *CBE Life Sciences Education*, 14(2), ar13. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.14-11-0216>
- Paris, J. H. (2021). An exploration of institutional motivations for holistic graduate admissions. *Perspectives*, 33(3) 3-5.
- Paris, J. H., Beckowski, C. P., & Fiorot, S. (2023). Predicting success: An examination of the predictive validity of a measure of motivational-developmental dimensions in college admissions. *Research in Higher Education*, 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-023-09743-w>
- Paris, J. H., Birnbaum, M., & Dix, N. (2024). Selecting students: Graduate admissions criteria and evaluation methodologies. In J. H. Paris & S. J. Kania (Eds.), *A comprehensive guide to graduate enrollment management: Advancing research and practice* (pp. 72-91). Routledge.
- Paris, J. H., Haviland, S., & Gooch, R. (2024). The graduate admissions experience: College seniors' perspectives on the application process. In J. H. Paris & S. J. Kania (Eds.), *A comprehensive guide to graduate enrollment management: Advancing research and practice* (pp. 55-71). Routledge.
- Paris, J. H., & Winfield, J. D. (2024). Exploring institutional rationales for holistic review in graduate admissions. *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly*, 11(4), 39-54.
- Patterson, F., Knight, A., Dowell, J., Nicholson, S., Cousans, F., & Cleland, J. (2016). How effective are selection methods in medical education? A systematic review. *Medical Education*, 50(1), 36-60. <https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.12817>
- Poropat, A. E. (2009). A meta-analysis of the five-factor model of personality and academic performance. *Psychological Bulletin*, 135(2), 322. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014996>

## (Non)cognitive dissonance

- Roland, E., & Bukoski B. E. (2024). Challenging the hidden curriculum of personal statements in graduate admissions: A developmental approach. In J. H. Paris & S. J. Kania (Eds.), *A comprehensive guide to graduate enrollment management: Advancing research and practice* (pp. 207-219). Routledge.
- Rosinger, K. O., Sarita Ford, K., & Choi, J. (2021). The role of selective college admissions criteria in interrupting or reproducing racial and economic inequities. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 92(1), 31-55.
- Sackett, P. R., Schmitt, N., Ellingson, J. E., & Kabin, M. B. (2001). High-stakes testing in employment, credentialing, and higher education: Prospects in a post-affirmative action world. *American Psychologist*, 56(4), 302-318.
- Salisu, I., Hashim, N., Mashi, M. S., & Aliyu, H. G. (2020). Perseverance of effort and consistency of interest for entrepreneurial career success: Does resilience matter? *Journal of Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies*, 12(2), 279-304.
- Schwager, I. T., Hülshager, U. R., Bridgeman, B., & Lang, J. W. (2015). Graduate student selection: Graduate record examination, socioeconomic status, and undergraduate grade point average as predictors of study success in a western European university. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 23, 71–79. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsa.12096>
- Sotelo, J., Gooch, R. M., Cho-Baker, S., Haviland, S. B., Kell, H. J., Ling, G., & Liu, O. L. (2023). An exploration of admissions-related practices from institutions' admissions web pages and implications for equity. *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly*, 11(2), 19-29.
- Sowbel, L. R., & Miller, S. E. (2015). Gatekeeping in graduate social work education: Should personality traits be considered? *Social Work Education*, 34, 110–124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2014.953046>
- Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina, 142 S. Ct. 896 (U.S. 2022).
- Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard College, 261 F. Supp. 3d 99 (D. Mass. 2017).
- Sung, M., & Yang, S. U. (2008). Toward the model of university image: The influence of brand personality, external prestige, and reputation. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 20(4), 357-376. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10627260802153207>
- Trapmann, S., Hell, B., Hirn, J. O. W., & Schuler, H. (2007). Meta-analysis of the relationship between the Big Five and academic success at university. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie/ Journal of Psychology*, 215(2), 132-151.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2019, February 21). Number of master and doctoral degrees doubles among population. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2019/education-degrees-double.html>
- Walpole, M., Burton, N. W., Kanyi, K., & Jackenthal, A. (2002). Selecting successful graduate students: In-depth interviews with GRE® users. ETS Research Report Series, 2002(1), i-29.
- Ward, N. (2007). The (un)predictability of computer science graduate school admissions. *Communications of the ACM*, 50(3), 104–106. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1226736.1226772>
- Woo, S. E., LeBreton, J. M., Keith, M. G., & Tay, L. (2022). Bias, fairness, and validity in graduate-school admissions: A psychometric perspective. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 18(1) 3-31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916211055374>

### APPENDIX

#### Skills and Qualities Drawn from PSQ Tool

Noncognitive Attribute	Description
Organization	Organization refers to behaviors associated with punctuality, organization, and systematicity in work style.
Leadership	Leadership refers to behaviors associated with comfort in expressing opinions, leading, and being in charge in social contexts.
Creativity	Creativity refers to behaviors associated with coming up with new ideas and original solutions and enjoying engaging in unconventional thinking
Curiosity	Curiosity refers to behaviors associated with seeking out opportunities to learn and having varying interests.
Collaboration	Collaboration refers to behaviors associated with getting along with others and being a mediator or facilitator in group settings.
Even-temperedness	Even-Temperedness refers to being calm, level-headed, and good at regulating and navigating emotions even in stressful situations.
Sociability	Sociability refers to behaviors associated with comfort in approaching others and being interested in meeting new people.
Responsibility	Responsibility refers to behaviors associated with loyalty, respecting obligations, and commitments, and being relied upon as a team member.
Self-discipline	Self-Discipline refers to maintaining focus, completing tasks, and considering options before deciding.
Perseverance	Perseverance refers to behaviors associated with diligence, ambition, hard work, goal striving, and proficiency.
Resiliency	Resiliency refers to internal psychological adjustment, a steady mood, and avoidance of worry even after negative feedback

Adapted from Kyllonen & Tan, 2022c.



# Moving Beyond Transactions: Understanding the Relationships between College Access Professionals and Underrepresented College-Bound Families



Authored by  
Stephany Cuevas (*Chapman University*)

## ABSTRACT

Framed by family engagement frameworks, this study presents four types of interactions college access professionals (CAPs) have with the families of underrepresented college-going students—inconsistent communication, transactional exchanges, student-family mediation, and trusting relationships—to explore the nature of family-educator partnerships for students' college access. Drawing from in-depth qualitative interviews with a diverse sample of 20 CAPs, this study demonstrates that the nature of these interactions and their corresponding family engagement practices are influenced by CAPs' job requirements and previous experiences working with families. This ultimately shapes their ability to invest in and develop strong, trusting partnerships with students' families. By understanding these family-educator interactions, college access programming can work toward benefitting from family-educator partnerships, which can lead to successful college acceptance and matriculation for underrepresented, college-bound students.

**Keywords:** college access, family engagement, first-generation students, college counseling

Family engagement research has documented that when students, families, and educators partner with each other, students are more likely to apply to, be accepted by, and matriculate into institutions of higher education (Kalamkarian et al., 2020; Mapp et al., 2022; Tierney, 2002). Underrepresented college-bound students often depend on school-level “institutional agents,” such as teachers and

school counselors, to help them navigate their way into higher education spaces (Harris & Kiyama, 2015). Nevertheless, due to their role demands, teachers and school counselors may not have the time, capacity, or knowledge to serve as college-specific student resources (American School Counselor Association, 2022; Kalamkarian et al., 2020). Thus, college access professionals (CAPs) help fill this need: CAPs are educators who work closely with students, specifically in college-going and college-related aspects. College access professionals might include college advisors, professional/trained mentors, career advisors, and other college-going specialists (American School Counselor Association, 2022).

However, to date, there is a limited understanding of the relationships between CAPs and students' families. Most family engagement research focuses on relationships between families and teachers or school counselors. Since CAPs are a central part of students' college-going support ecosystem, especially for underrepresented students, it is essential to understand how they engage with students' families for student success. Framed by the importance of family-school



## Moving Beyond Transactions

partnerships, this study explores the nature, effectiveness, and potential of college access professionals' (CAPs) family engagement practices. Specifically, it presents four different types of interactions CAPs have with the families of underrepresented students — inconsistent communication, transactional exchanges, student-family mediation, and trusting relationships — and analyzes the elements that influence them, including their job requirements and conditions. Findings suggest that these interactions, while promising, are limited in their relational nature. Since both CAPs and families play an essential role in student success, it is crucial to understand how to improve and support relationships between them.

This study defines underrepresented students as students traditionally underrepresented in colleges and universities, such as first-generation college students, students of color, students from lower socioeconomic households, and students with disabilities. Family engagement is broadly defined as “collaborative relationships and initiatives between school professionals, families, and community members...for the purpose of implementing programs that address students' complex needs; increase their educational resilience and strengths; and foster their academic, social/emotional, and college-career development” (Bryan et al., 2018, p. 1). Here, educational resilience refers to students' ability to succeed academically despite “risk factors” (such as poverty, discrimination, and adverse environments)

that make it difficult for them to do so (Bryan, 2005).

### Literature Review

#### Families as an “Untapped Resource” in College Access Work

There is overwhelming evidence about the importance of family engagement for students' college access (Bryan et al., 2018; Cuevas, 2020; Hines et al., 2014). Research shows that the families of first-generation college-going students are critical players in students' college-going even if they did not earn a college degree in the United States themselves and/or have limited college knowledge. Families support students by motivating them to pursue higher education, modeling a passion for lifelong learning, and monitoring their grades and extracurricular activities, for example (Auerbach, 2004; Cuevas, 2020; Fan et al., 2009; Hines et al., 2014). In short, families play different and essential roles in supporting students' college-going goals.

This research has also documented family's frustration with their inability to better support students: Families of first-generation college-going students want to have the information necessary to help students directly with the college-going process; they want to have the knowledge and tools to help students successfully apply to colleges and universities (Cuevas, 2020; Tierney, 2002). For instance, college access programs often fail to share college knowledge information with families.

## Moving Beyond Transactions

To avoid stressing parents, these programs' staff take on the job of supporting students individually (Tierney, 2002). As Tierney (2002) concludes, there is a disconnect between "(a) research supporting the hypothesis that parent and family involvement increases the chances of low-income students' gaining entrance into college and (b) the practice of family participation in college outreach programs" (p. 588). Similarly, Fann and colleagues (2009) note that families "remain an untapped resource with incredible potential for increasing the educational chances of historically underrepresented students" (p. 390). Thus, extant research notes a discrepancy between acknowledging the importance of family engagement in students' college access and acting on this information.

To benefit from families' "untapped resource" as a college-going tool for underrepresented students, research notes the importance of multilevel interventions involving multiple stakeholders (Militello et al., 2011). Specifically, school counselors and other school-based staff can develop "targeted partnership interventions" that engage parents, families, and community members to work together for student success (Bryan et al., 2018; Perna et al., 2008). For example, Bryan and colleagues (2020) note that school counselors are uniquely positioned to promote equity-focused, school-family-community partnerships. Their work proposes a partnership model rooted in empowerment, democratic collaboration,

social justice, and strengths-based principles to foster resilience and embrace strengths-based, equity-focused, and culturally appropriate partnerships (for more, see Bryan et al., 2020). Additionally, extant research also notes that school-university partnerships, school-business partnerships, and school-family partnerships are essential partnership strategies that can effectively promote a college-going culture and college access (Gandara, 2002; Harris & Kiyama, 2015; Militello et al., 2011; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2010). In sum, this research makes it clear: For underrepresented students, college-going is a collective effort that includes families, educators, community members, and students.

### Family Engagement in College Access Programs

Acknowledging the limitations of school counselors and teachers, college access programs (also called external college programs (ECPs)) are intended to support school-based staff in increasing the number of students attending colleges and universities (Kalamkarian et al., 2020). College access programs include federally funded TRIO programs, such as Upward Bound and Talent Search. Others are college or university-based outreach initiatives designed to share college knowledge with students from underrepresented communities. These initiatives are often part of institutions' public missions (Fann et al., 2009; Mariscal et al., 2019). Non-profit organizations and out-of-school programs that support students' college-

## Moving Beyond Transactions

going goals and aspirations also help students navigate college enrollment.

Extant research notes the different ways college access programs interact with families: the structure of the programs and program requirements shape how their staff members engage with families (Tierney, 2002). For example, some programs have components that invite parents to events once a year, such as parent nights, in which program staff explain the program's purpose to them, or end-of-the-year events, such as graduations. Other programs may have voluntary parent programs on weekends, where they share college knowledge and other school-related information with parents (Tierney, 2002). Furthermore, research also notes that college access programs differ in how intentional they are in centering the role of families in students' college-going goals (Grub et al., 2002; Tierney, 2002). For example, Grubb and colleagues (2002) found that counselors in the Puente Program, which was established to increase the number of Latinx students who enroll in four-year colleges, presented a series of college-related workshops to parents and families, ranging from topics such as financial aid and course requirements. They also held one-on-one meetings with parents and students who had questions. The researchers note that these counselors had consistent communication and interactions with parents and were able to develop strong relationships. Furthermore, Tierney (2002) notes that the Puente Program developed such strong relationships because family involvement is central to their values: the program believes

that "learning exists in concert with families" (p. 602). Hence, the Puente Program is an outstanding example of a program that successfully engages with families for student success.

The variation in family involvement and engagement in college access programs is not because programs do not value working with families. Tierney (2002) points out that college access programs are restricted in their ability to work closely with families because they are underfunded and short-staffed. Moreover, they are not evaluated in their work with families. Without the expectation to do so, overworked college access program staff do not prioritize working with students' families. Related, research also notes that educators must often be trained to work with families. While they are expected to work with families, they must be given the frameworks, tools, or examples of best practices (Mapp et al., 2022). While this research predominantly focuses on teachers and school counselors, it also applies to the work of CAPs. Educators need to be given the opportunity to develop the capacity to work with families to benefit from the potential of family-educator partnerships (Mapp et al., 2022).

### Theoretical Framework

In this study, I used Mapp and Bergman's (2019) Dual Capacity-Building Framework (DCBF) for Family-School Partnerships to explore CAPs' family engagement practices. Specifically, I use the "essential conditions" portion of the framework.

## Moving Beyond Transactions

K-12 research and practice has reconceptualized “family engagement” to signify a mindset, a set of cultural values and beliefs, about the role of families in students’ education — families are seen as assets in students’ lives, essential to their academic outcomes and overall well-being from birth through college and career (Mapp & Bergman, 2021; Mapp et al., 2022). Educational spaces should intentionally develop equitable partnerships with families to support students. Moreover, these relationships should be based on mutual trust and respect. These values — partnership, trust, and respect — are at the core of the DCBF. The DCBF outlines the “essential conditions” of successful family engagement practices, initiatives, and policies. The conditions include (1) process conditions, which are the day-to-day elements necessary for effective practice, and (2) organizational conditions, which are required to develop the infrastructure for the process conditions to sustain effective family engagement practices (Mapp & Bergman, 2019, p. 12). The process conditions note that family engagement practices must be relational and built on mutual trust, linked to students’ learning and development, asset-based, culturally responsive and respectful, collaborative, and interactive (Mapp & Bergman, 2021). Additionally, they also note the importance of institutional factors, noting that family engagement must also be systemic, or embraced by leadership across organizations; integrated, meaning it is embedded in all strategies; and sustained with resources and infrastructure. These are the organizational

conditions (Mapp & Bergman, 2021).

Mapp and Bergman describe the DCBF as a “compass” that helps develop effective educator-family partnerships that support student academic and socioemotional well-being. Applied to the context of this study, the framework’s essential conditions help explore the nature, effectiveness, and potential of CAPs’ family engagement practices.

### Methodology

Data for this project stems from a larger, institutional IRB-approved phenomenology study on college access professionals (IRB-22-210). The larger study was motivated by the limited understanding of the experiences of these educators. Since they are not teachers or school counselors and are often employed by external organizations or programs, they are left out of existing literature. Since phenomenology focuses on how different individuals make sense of the same phenomenon and helps identify the commonalities of these experiences, this research approach is ideal (Patton, 2002). The phenomenon at the center of this study is CAPs’ work with underrepresented students and their families in their college-going aspirations. However, traditional phenomenology asks researchers to “bracket” their positionalities, or “become aware of personal bias, to eliminate personal involvement with the subject material...” (Patton, 2002, p. 484). I, like other scholars, particularly women of color, acknowledge that my positionality, further



## Moving Beyond Transactions

discussed below, is an asset to this study (Bernal, 1998; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Given, 2008). Additionally, the study also applied Morse and colleagues' (2002) verification strategies to ensure both reliability and validity of data, including what they call methodological coherence (i.e., considering how method and approach are appropriate for the research question), an appropriate sample, and concurrent collection and analysis of the data.

### Researcher's Positionality

I, the study's primary investigator, am a first-generation college graduate who identifies as a woman of color, daughter of Mexican immigrants. I attended a large public high school in an urban city and was part of a TRIO program. Additionally, I also have experience working as a college access professional in a large urban school district. As such, I share similarities both with study participants and the students they served. This "insider" perspective informed my study design and approach (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). For example, my positionality allowed me to build rapport with participants, as I shared both my personal and professional experiences with the subject matter. I also shared my motivation for conducting this study—the limited understanding of CAPs' experiences, especially about their work with families. Yet, throughout the study, I was also mindful of the ways that I am an "outsider" to the work: I have not worked as a CAP in over a decade, geographical locations and context shape experiences, and student needs have changed (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Thus,

throughout data collection and analysis, I constantly wrote reflexive memos (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Patton, 2002). In addition to summarizing interviews and identifying emerging themes, I also reflected on my own experiences, knowledge, and perspectives. These memos were used during data analysis to ensure appropriate data interpretation.

### Sample

This study focused on the perspectives of a diverse sample of 20 college access professionals (CAPs) who work with underrepresented students. To qualify for the study, participants must have had a job or position whose purpose is to support underrepresented students in their college-going aspirations. The sample is summarized in Table 1 and includes participants with job titles such as college advisors (n=9), college counselors (n=3), directors of college access programs (n=2), and other specialists trained to serve students in navigating their college and career pathways (n=6). All participants worked in urban school settings and predominantly worked with students from low-income families, families of color, immigrant families, and students who would be the first in their families to attend college. Over half the sample identified as female (n=11). Most respondents identified as people of color (n=18). The average number of years working in college access was seven years. All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

## Moving Beyond Transactions

Table 1  
Study Participant Demographics.

Participant	Job Title	Years in Field	Age	Gender	Ethnicity/ Race	Highest Level of Education (Self)
Bernardo	Educational Advisor, TRIO Program	2.5	29	M	Latinx	BA
José	Campus Recruiter, Small Private College	10	37	M	Latinx	Masters
Marisol	Academic Coordinator, TRIO Program	10	32	F	Latinx	Masters
Juan	Assistant Director, TRIO Program	1.5	35	M	Latinx	Masters
Gabriel	Program Coordinator, TRIO Program	4	27	M	Latinx	Masters
Adrian	College Counselor, Private School	10	31	M	Latinx	BA
Levi	Associate Director, Non-Profit Organization	8	31	M	Latinx	Masters
Jessica	Founder, College Access Program	10	34	F	Black/ AA	Masters
Martha	College Access Manager, Non-Profit Organization	6	28	F	Latinx	Masters
Sara	College Access Coordinator, After-School Program	1.8	25	F	Latinx	Masters
Michelle	College Counselor, Private School	11	39	F	Asian/ Asian American	Doctoral
Luis	College & Career Advisor, University-Based Outreach Program	5	24	M	Latinx	Masters
Heather	College Affordability Advisor, Non-Profit Program	4	24	F	White	BA
Marco	Postsecondary Ambassador, Non-Profit Program	< 1	24	M	Latinx	BA
Christina	Program Director, TRIO Program	11	29	F	Latinx	Masters
Laura	Educational Advisor, TRIO Program	8	28	F	Latinx	Masters
Santiago	Academic Counselor, Public School	11	33	M	Latinx	Masters
Natalie	Success Coach, Non-Profit Program	13	35	F	White	Masters
Erica	College Advisor, University-Based Outreach Program	2	24	F	Asian/ Asian American	BA
Vanessa	Educational Advisor, TRIO Program	4	24	F	Latinx	BA

## Moving Beyond Transactions

### Data Collection and Analysis

Each participant was interviewed once via Zoom or phone. Interviews were audio-recorded, and all took place in English. Interview length ranged from 60 to 108 minutes. Participants were asked about the nature of their jobs, their experiences working with students' families, and their professional training. Participants were also asked about the role of families in students' college-going aspirations and about challenges in their interactions with families. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and uploaded to the qualitative data analysis program NVivo. Data were analyzed using a flexible coding analytic procedure (Deterding & Waters, 2021), which postulates that empirical qualitative research is in dialogue with existing theory and findings from previous studies. First, index codes were applied, identifying every statement in which participants described how they interacted with students' families. The second stage consisted of applying analytic codes. Analytic codes were created using memos written during data collection and initial transcript review. Codes were also created based on existing literature such as "relational trust," "institutional agents," and "family-educator communication." The essential conditions described in the DCBF were also included. Open coding was also conducted to identify CAPS-family interactions not captured in the memos or those based on existing literature. Codes during this phase included "CAPS training" and "gendered family dynamics." Subsequently, codes were refined, and similar

codes were grouped and examined, moving beyond descriptive codes to codes that implied a relationship. For example, "limited communication" and "information-based programming" became "transactional interactions." These codes described CAPS-family interactions and the elements that shaped them and became the themes presented in the findings.

This multi-step coding strategy was an interactive and ongoing process throughout data analysis. The third stage of data analysis consisted of exploring validity and refining theory (Morse et al., 2002). Inter-coder reliability processes were conducted, and reflexive memos were reviewed. Data and codes were reexamined to ensure consistency in describing CAPS-family interactions of supportive behaviors.

### Study Limitations

As an interview-based, exploratory study, this study is not intended to be representative of the entire college access professional population. This study begins to understand the different interactions and relationships CAPs have with students' families. Thus, the sample comprises a range of CAP roles and is not bound to one specific state, school system, or program structure. While the findings are not generalizable, they serve to improve college access efforts for underrepresented students. Most importantly, this study helps fill the gap in the literature about families and family engagement concerning CAP-centered educational spaces.

## Moving Beyond Transactions

### Findings

#### CAP-Family Interactions

All college access professionals interviewed for this study interacted with their students' families to different extents. The following section details the different interactions that CAPs had with students' families. Interactions are divided into the following categories: inconsistent communication, transactional exchanges, student-family mediation, and trusting relationships.

#### Inconsistent Communication

Some CAPs believed they did not have good relationships with students' families because they did not interact often with them. Participants also described the limited ways they communicated with families, including generic emails, which often only introduced CAPs to families and the services they provided students. Erica, a college advisor for a university-based outreach program, described how emails were her primary communication method with families. She shared, "We would send out a lot of emails, but that was just one way. We didn't have a lot of parents responding back." Upon reflecting on this, she acknowledged that emails were one-directional. "Maybe that was not the best way to communicate with them." Furthermore, participants also noted that limited relationships with families could impact students' access to resources. This was especially true when it came to matters of financial aid. Families, participants explained, felt uncomfortable sharing personal financial information. Family members hesitated when

their children asked for tax forms. Students then relayed this information to their CAPs, who, in return, had to strategize how to communicate with families the importance of that paperwork for financial aid. Heather, a college affordability advisor for a non-profit organization, described this tension:

*I think if there isn't a great relationship [with families], it's tricky... some people just really don't want to give their information. I've also had some folks who were like, "We just don't at all want to apply for financial aid." And discourage their students from doing it.*

Heather explained that the stress and anxiety over sharing financial information could be alleviated if she communicated better with students' families and earned their trust.

#### Transactional Exchanges

CAPs also described transactional exchanges. These were "informative interactions" with families where they shared information about the college application process, college requirements, students' progress, and financial aid. However, they did not create the space or opportunity to develop relationships with them—as one participant put it, these interactions were "one-directional and impersonal."

Marisol, an academic coordinator for a TRIO program, explained that her organization did have some family-oriented programming, such as parent conferences, family night for their summer program, and parent workshops. Yet, she believed these did not

## Moving Beyond Transactions

help develop relationships with families. The parent workshops, for example, were the least successful of the programming:

*We give the parents information, but then that's that. There is no follow-up. And I think the follow-up is where we lose the opportunity to develop relationships... [The workshop] is a one-time thing, and that is it. I wish there were more follow-up workshops. But that's not what we do.*

Marisol believed the parent workshops had the potential to be spaces where family members developed a better understanding of the college-going process and where she, as a college access professional, could develop strong relationships with them. Instead, she often felt rushed to cover content. And, as the quote above shows, the workshops were a one-time interaction with no built-in infrastructure for follow-ups. Without these mechanisms in place, CAPs and family members only have opportunities for transactional exchanges.

### Student-Family Mediation

A third interaction CAPs described placed them as mediators between students and families. Due to their positions as counselors, advisors, and the like, participants found themselves in the middle of family and student disagreements or miscommunications.

Some college-related processes and applications require students to share

information about their parents. This is sometimes stressful and anxiety-producing for students who do not have good relationships with their parents. For example, Sara, a college access coordinator for an after-school program, shared how she had to communicate with a parent who was absent in a student's life. She had to do this because the CSS Profile requests parental information:

*The CSS Profile is very difficult because it can trigger a lot of trauma in a student, especially if they haven't talked to a parent or they don't know their whereabouts. And then I have to ask a parent that isn't in this child's life why aren't they there. Because I have to write a letter to explain to the university why they're not [present] and appeal why we can't send their credential in. That is really hard.*

Here, Sara describes how she mediated between her student and their absent parent and dealt with the emotional toll that took on the student and, presumably, the parent. Respondents also described facing gendered dynamics in their mediation interactions with families. Predominantly, CAPs discussed how their female-identifying students asked them to advocate on their behalf to their families. Specifically, they wanted them to convince their parents to allow them to leave home for college. Being in this mediator position was uncomfortable for Santiago, an academic counselor in a 6-12 public school. He disagreed with some families' gendered expectations; he did not think gender should determine students' college opportunities.

## Moving Beyond Transactions

However, he respected that families had a right to develop their ideas and beliefs. Santiago admitted that if he had a better relationship with students' families before engaging in such conversations, the stress of the misunderstandings could be minimized. In short, Santiago acknowledged that there was limited trust between him and some of his students' families.

### Trusting Relationships

While all respondents reported feeling like they had limited relationships with their students' families, some believed they had close relationships with a handful of their students' families. CAPs who reported having trusting relationships noted that they had known the families for more than one year and often worked with multiple siblings within the same family. For example, a TRIO program director, Christina, described working with three siblings from the same family and feeling very comfortable approaching the parents. She shared, "If Sam [student] is not responding to my emails, I can easily text her mom and tell her to remind her." When asked to reflect on how this kind of relationship shaped her perspectives about working with families, she said she is now more intentional about relationship-building with families:

*I talk to the parents and let them know, "We are a team. We are a process. For me to be able to help your child, I need your support." I have an open-door policy, "You could contact me if you have any questions. You want me to sit down with you and explain this with you? I will take the time to do that."*

Thus, Christina's experience shows how developing and experiencing trusting relationships with families benefits her work with that family and motivates her future family engagement practices.

### Elements that Shape CAPs-Family Interactions

Considering the DCBF, the ideal CAPs-family interactions are trusting relationships like the ones described by Christina. While the interactions described in the previous section are not linear, they do not build from one another, this study presents different ways these two important actors interact. To understand why and how these different interactions occur, it is also essential to understand what shapes how college access professionals interact with families. The elements identified in this study include barriers and challenges to family interactions, job requirements, and CAPs' family engagement experiences.



## Moving Beyond Transactions

### Barriers to Relationships

Like research on family engagement in K-12 classroom settings (Mapp et al., 2022), CAPs in this study described different challenges and barriers in developing relationships with their students' families. These include language barriers, limited time to invest in family meetings or programming due to multiple job requirements, and difficulty scheduling meetings with parents due to busy work schedules. Additionally, some CAPs described how families did not know who CAPs were. Thus, limited opportunities for communication with families prevent relationships from developing.

Some CAPs expressed frustration with their limited interactions with families. For Sara, it was disheartening when families did not attend events:

*It was really frustrating to have this whole curriculum, this whole lesson plan planned out and then we only had 20 people show up... I was just frustrated that I would plan something or set up a time and they weren't able to come.*

Sara explained that she understood that families had busy schedules; she believed she would be less frustrated if she had stronger relationships with families.

Michelle, a college counselor at a private school, noted that another challenge to her work with families was the growing number of families talking to multiple people about students' college-going plans, including

extended family and co-workers who referred to TikTok videos for information. She noted, "It definitely can create miscommunication between the various parties who might be involved." Thus, most of the issues respondents faced were related to communication with families. The impact of communication is an important finding to highlight because communication between educators and families is at the core of relational family engagement practices (Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

### Job Requirements

While all participants had a job whose purpose was to support underrepresented students in navigating the college-going process, job requirements varied. Thus, job context impacts CAPs' interactions with families. CAPs who worked for federally funded TRIO programs were required to interact with families. However, the nature of these interactions varied. Some required parents to be part of the interview process. Others had parent information nights one or two times a school year. Others hosted parent workshops throughout the semester. As previously described, while these CAPs interacted with families, they believed they did not have meaningful and trusting relationships.

Participants with jobs within schools, such as college counselors, described their large student loads. Because they had to support many students, they did not have time to

## Moving Beyond Transactions

develop intentional relationships with families. Similarly, CAPs who worked for out-of-school organizations also felt the burden of large caseloads. They wished they had better relationships with other school individuals (i.e., school counselors). If they worked closely with their colleagues, the barrier that large caseloads presented could be alleviated, which could free up time to work more closely with students' families.

Most participants shared that their organizations, whether school-based or out-of-school, did not prioritize working with families. Instead, they framed their missions and programming around student needs.

Thus, family engagement was not systemic, integrated, or sustained. The only exceptions to this were Luis and Jessica—family partnerships were at the core, they described, of their programming. When asked why this was the case, Luis shared that a professor whose research included family engagement conceptualized the program he worked for; Luis was a college and career advisor for a university-based outreach program. Thus, the program's structure, events, and curriculum were intentionally research-based, including family engagement research. Similarly, Jessica also prioritized partnering with families due to her personal experiences. Before beginning her college access consulting business, she worked for college access programs that did not partner with families. She believed this was a missed opportunity. Thus, when she started her organization, she prioritized relationships with families. These two outliers show that prioritizing family engagement

within a college access context is possible—it needs to be intentionally embedded into program structures.

### Experience Working with Families

Related to the previous theme, respondents' experiences working with families also shaped the nature of their relationships with them. Participants with fewer years in their positions were more likely to report feeling unprepared to work with families and were anxious about reaching out to family members. Nevertheless, all participants desired professional development on how to work with families. Even participants with years of job experience wanted concrete and detailed best practices. As an educational advisor for a TRIO program, Vanessa, noted, "I can say I want parents to be more involved in the program, but I would not know what events we should have." Participants believed learning how to develop family-centered programming would lead to stronger family relationships. This is one of the most important findings of this study: CAPs wanted to develop their capacity to work with families. They understood that partnerships with students' families were at the core of their work with underrepresented college-going students. They wanted to improve their practices.

## Moving Beyond Transactions

### Discussion

Framed by the notion that family-educator partnerships are essential for student success (Mapp & Bergman, 2019), this study explores an understudied segment of college access efforts for underrepresented students: how college access professionals (CAPs) interact with students' families. Most, if not all, participants mentioned that they had inconsistent communication and transactional exchanges with families and often served as mediators between families and students.

Participants linked their limited relationships with students' families to their inconsistent communication. Since they did not interact with them often, participants believed they could not develop strong, trusting relationships with families. Thus, underlying the findings of this study is the importance of trust:

without trust, study participants could not develop the relational and collaborative family engagement practices the DCBF advocates for (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). Relatedly, participants also noted that when they communicated with families, it was to ask them for personal information (e.g., tax information for financial aid applications) or to update them that their child had, as one participant noted, "done something wrong."

This communication is different from what family engagement research notes is successful: in addition to being relational, collaborative, and interactive, family engagement practices should be linked to learning (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). By communicating with families only when CAPs need information or when their children have done something wrong, there is a failed opportunity to center students' college-going aspirations in meaningful ways (Mapp et al., 2022; Tierney, 2002).



**"underlying the findings of this study is the importance of trust: without trust, study participants could not develop the relational and collaborative family engagement practices the DCBF advocates for."**

Furthermore, for CAPs whose programs or schools did have family-oriented programming, these were often once or twice per academic year and were information-based events. There were no opportunities for bidirectional information sharing and relationship-building with families, which are essential conditions for successful

family-educator partnerships (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). Without such partnerships, rooted in trust, CAPs may struggle to have difficult conversations with families, including conversations about sensitive topics such as absent parenting or gendered expectations. Nevertheless, some participants did have trusting relationships with some families. These CAPs had spent time developing those relationships: they may

## Moving Beyond Transactions

have known the families for years, over multiple sibling generations, and had intentionally invested time getting to know families. Moreover, they also shared that their relationships with families made their jobs easier. Thus, these examples prove that CAPS can develop relational, asset-based, and collaborative relationships with families linked to students' learning and development (Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

The study also reveals that the CAPs in this study worked for organizations that did not have the institutional factors described in the DCBF. These include establishing family engagement as a systemic, integrated, and sustained value. For instance, CAPs' job requirements also influenced their relationships with families. Reflecting findings from previous studies, large caseloads, multiple roles within their job, and limited understanding of school dynamics took most of their time and attention (Tierney, 2002). Additionally, while most participants shared that their organizations or programs did think working with families was important, the majority noted that working with families was not a priority (Tierney, 2002). As a result, many cited their limited experience working with families and the need for more professional development as further limiting their relationships with families.

According to the DCBF, all educators must invest in developing partnerships with students' families (Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

Regardless of the job description and context, the framework postulates that all educators should be fluent in family engagement practices. Most study participants acknowledged this: working with families is essential. Nevertheless, they also shared that they did not have the tools or capacity necessary to develop these relationships and authentic connections. The following section proposes recommendations for practice, policy, and research based on these findings.

### Recommendations

CAP-family relationships are essential to consider as CAPs often do most of the one-on-one college-going work with underrepresented college-bound students. Therefore, the first recommendation is that college access programming needs to include students' families in the college-going process. This needs to be a program-wide or school-wide policy, which will help make family engagement systemic, integrated, and sustained. Findings suggest that CAPs' college access work needs to involve developing trusting relationships with students' families. To develop these, CAPs need to interact with families in meaningful ways. A policy requiring family engagement can instigate and motivate these efforts. In terms of practice, CAPs should design events and programming that allow them to get to know families personally, are linked to students' learning, and are culturally responsive and respectful. An example is a series of bi-monthly or monthly workshops focused on sharing college-related

## Moving Beyond Transactions

information with families in their home language and through interactive activities. Workshops should also intentionally carve out time for families and CAPs to get to know each other personally. Through such programming, CAPs and families interact more than once a semester or school year, get to know each other, and develop trusting relationships. Related to this, CAPs' job descriptions should be re-designed to include partnering with families as a job requirement. Through this, family engagement is designed into the nature of the role and, consequently, the school or organization's programming aligning with policy demands. This can address the organizational conditions necessary for successful family engagement practices.

The second recommendation is to train CAPs to work with families. Most respondents noted that they had not received any professional development on how to partner with students' families. They wanted this training. Leaders in high schools and college access programs must (1) acknowledge the importance of family engagement and (2) train their staff to partner with families effectively. By investing in professional development opportunities highlighting the importance of partnership work and presenting examples of best practices, schools and college access programs can make family engagement systemic, integrated, and sustained.


In terms of research, further investigation into the different interactions CAPs have with families is necessary. This is essential because these educators play an important role in students' college-going goals. While this study began to explore the nature of these relationships in urban settings, future research should consider how CAPs in different settings (e.g., in-school, out-of-school, rural schools) work with families. This can help identify context-specific needs. Furthermore, future studies should also consider and include the perspectives of students and families to understand how they conceive and experience these relationships. Finally, considering the DCBF framework, future research needs to more deeply explore how to improve the capacity of both CAPs and families to partner with each other.

## Conclusion

This study illustrates the often-nuanced relationships college access professionals (CAPs) have with underrepresented students' families. By applying family engagement frameworks that center the importance of family-educator partnerships, the study shows that, while CAPs have different interactions with students' families, they are often limited in their relational nature. Furthermore, the study also shows the importance of developing their capacity to partner with families: these educators understood the importance of working with families for student success. However, they did not feel like they knew how to do partnership work or had the time to do so.



## Moving Beyond Transactions

Thus, it is vital to understand the different relationships and interactions CAPs describe in this study and the elements that shape them to improve the college-going efforts of underrepresented students. Understanding these family-educator interactions and working toward benefitting from strong and trusting family-educator partnerships can lead to successful college acceptance and matriculation for underrepresented college-bound students. 

### REFERENCES

- American School Counselor Association. (2022). The school counselor and college access professionals. The School Counselor and College Access Professionals - American School Counselor Association (ASCA). Retrieved January 17, 2023, from <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/Standards-Positions/Position-Statements/ASCA-Position-Statements/The-School-Counselor-and-College-Access-Profession>
- Auerbach, S. (2004). Engaging Latino parents in supporting college pathways: Lessons from a college access program. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 3, 125–145. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192703262514>
- Bernal, D. D. (1998). Using a Chicana feminist epistemology in educational research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 68(4), 555–582. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.68.4.5wv1034973g22q48>
- Bryan, J. (2005). Fostering educational resilience and achievement in urban schools through school-family-community partnerships. *Professional School Counseling*, 8(3), 219–227. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42732462>
- Bryan, J., Williams, J.M., & Griffin, D. (2020). Fostering educational resilience and opportunities in urban schools through equity-focused school-family-community partnerships. *Professional School Counseling*, 23(1 part 2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X19899179>
- Bryan, J.A., Young, A., Griffin, D., & Holcomb-McCoy, C. (2018). Leadership practices linked to involvement in school-family-community partnerships: A national study. *Professional School Counseling*, 21(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X18761>
- Cuevas, S. (2020). From spectators to partners: The significant role of self-efficacy in Latinx immigrant parental engagement in post-secondary planning. *Journal of Latinos in Education*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2020.1747024>
- Deterding, N. M., & Waters, M. C. (2021). Flexible coding of in-depth interviews: A Twenty-first-century approach. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 50(2), 708–739. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124118799377>
- Dwyer, S. C., & Buckle, J. L. (2009). The space between: On being an insider-outsider in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), 54–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800105>
- Fann, A., McClafferty Jarsky, K., & McDonough, P. M. (2009). Parent involvement in the college planning process: A case study of P-20 collaboration. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 8(4), 374–393. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192709347847>
- Gandara, P. (2002). A study of high school Puente: What we have learned about preparing Latino youth for postsecondary education. *Educational Policy*, 16, 474–495. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904802164002>
- Given, L. M. (2008). *The Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. Sage.
- Grubb, W. N., Lara, C. M., & Valdez, S. (2002). Counselor, coordinator, monitor, mom: The roles of counselors in the Puente program. *Educational Policy*, 16(4), 547–571. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904802016004005>
- Harris, D. M., & Kiyama, J. M. (2015). The role of school and community-based programs in aiding Latina/o high school persistence. *Education and Urban Society*, 47(2), 182–206. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124513495274>



## Moving Beyond Transactions

- Hines, E. M., Borders, L. D., Gonzalez, L. M., Villalba, J. A., & Henderson, A. (2014). Parental involvement in college planning: Cultural considerations when working with African American families. *Journal for Multicultural Education*, 8, 249–260. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JME-06-2014-0025>
- Kalamkarian, H. S., Lising Antonio, A., Gilkes Borr, T., & Foster, J. (2020). Reconsidering the role of college advisors as key relationship brokers in high school networks. In W.G. Tierney & S. Kolluri (Eds.), *The relational sociology and research on schools, colleges, and universities* (pp. 111-134).
- Mariscal, J., Marquez Kiyama, J., & Navarro Benavides, V. (2019). The embodiment and enactment of funds of knowledge among Latina/o university outreach staff. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 21(4), 348–365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2019.1653299>
- Mapp, K.L. & Bergman, E. (2019). Dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships (Version 2). Retrieved from: [www.dualcapacity.org](http://www.dualcapacity.org)
- Mapp, K.L., Henderson, A.T., Cuevas, S., Franco, M.C., & Ewert, S. (2022). Everyone wins! The evidence for family-school partnerships & implications for practice. *Scholastics*.
- Militello, M., Schweid, J., & Carey, J. (2011). ¡Sí se puede en colaboración! Increasing college placement rates of low-income students. *Teachers College Record*, 113, 1435–1476. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0161468111111300701>
- Morse, J. M., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K., & Spiers, J. (2002). Verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1(2), 13–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690200100202>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Perna, L., Rowan-Kenyon, H., Thomas, S., Bell, A., Anderson, R., & Li, C. (2008). The role of college counseling in shaping college opportunity: Variations across high schools. *Review of Higher Education*, 31, 131–159. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2007.0073>
- Rowan-Kenyon, H. T., Bell, A. D., & Perna, L. W. (2008). Contextual influences on parental involvement in college going: Variations by socioeconomic class. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79, 564–586. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2008.11772117>
- Tierney, W. G. (2002). Parents and families in precollege preparation: The lack of connection between research and practice. *Educational Policy*, 16(4), 588–606. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904802016004007>
- Walker, J., Shenker, S., & Hoover-Dempsey, K. (2010). Why do parents become involved in their children's education? Implications for school counselors. *Professional School Counseling*, 14, 27–41. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42732747>

# Guest Perspective:

## *Master Narrative of College Access Belies Reality for Today's Students*



Authored by  
Jonathan S. Lewis (*uAspire*)  
René A. Hernandez (*Virginia Tech*)

The college access field has become unmoored. Enrollment among traditional-aged students has been in retreat since 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, 2023), and just over one-third of Americans report feeling confident in higher education (Brenan, 2023). The pandemic appeared to amplify the desire among high school students for alternatives; nearly two-thirds of teens polled by ECMC Group (2023) indicated openness to pathways other than a bachelor's degree. Major employers and at least 16 states have committed to “tear the paper ceiling” – that is, eliminate degree requirements as a prerequisite for employment, or to develop alternative methods of industry certification (Opportunity@Work, n.d.; Smalley, 2023). Viewed in aggregate, it seems clear that both interest in and pursuit of American higher education is waning – a jarring reality for those of us committed to college access and student success. How did we get here? Past research on college-going behaviors indicates that students' postsecondary pathways are driven by a variety of personal, familial, and social factors, only some of which students can control or influence (e.g.,

Iloh, 2019; Perna, 2006). It is not difficult to find structural and environmental stressors (e.g., affordability, family, work, politics) that would nudge high school graduates away from pursuing higher education, and simultaneously dissuade the 40 million adults with some college but no credential from returning (Gallup & Lumina, 2023; Causey et al., 2023). It may be surprising, therefore, that survey respondents also indicate that postsecondary education is more important than ever for career advancement (Gallup & Lumina, 2023). This finding is supported by federal data linking postsecondary credentials with higher pay (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023) and projections that by 2031 nearly three-quarters of all jobs will require some postsecondary education or training (Carnevale, Smith, Van Der Werf, & Quinn, 2023). Moreover, the pitched legal battles over race-conscious admissions (Bleemer, 2020; Carnevale, Mabel & Campbell, 2023), legacy admissions (June & O'Leary, 2023), and the pre-pandemic pay-for-admissions scandal (Jaschik, 2019) within elite colleges also suggest a high-stakes competition for access to certain institutions. It seems that where some perceive higher education as a risky endeavor, one likely to reinforce

## Guest Perspective: Master Narrative

intergenerational wealth gaps (Haneman, 2022; Hicks et al., 2021; Houle & Addo, 2019), others see a vehicle for likely upward mobility (Kwakye & Oliver, 2022; Postsecondary Value Commission, 2021). What accounts for these inconsistencies? In addition to diverging perspectives across demographic groups, we believe that we are observing – and also participating in – the reenactment of longstanding master narratives about what postsecondary education means (Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2016, 2021). Master narratives – a construct from the field of narrative psychology – are defined as “culturally shared stories that guide thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviors” (McLean & Syed, 2016, p.323). To be considered a master narrative, a story ought to be easy to adopt and straightforward to apply, quietly reliable yet not heavy-handed.

We have been tracking the beliefs and behaviors about higher education among a small group of California high school graduates, relying on the master and alternative narrative framework to guide participant interviews as well as data analysis. We selected this conceptual framework because we were motivated to understand the ways in which personal narratives develop over time through their interaction with family, peers, social structures, and systems (Hammack, 2008). Implicit beliefs and attitudes toward postsecondary education and career options vary both across and within communities

(Gallup & Lumina, 2023; Quadlin & Powell, 2022) and this variation manifests in the form of different challenges for individuals. For example, in some places, students and high school counselors report that prestigious universities are the most desirable option after high school; in others, the expectation is for a high school graduate to find a job or begin a career path that will enable the financial support of oneself and possibly the extended family. Others feel compelled to balance both work and school simultaneously. In these instances, the choice to follow or depart from the master narrative will have repercussions for their future pathways and career development.

Alternative narratives, as the name suggests, depart from, and sometimes serve to contradict, master narratives. McLean and Syed (2016) describe how the stories that each of us tells about ourselves – our personal narratives – develop and are internalized through a “negotiation between self and society” (p. 325). Master narratives are part of the narrative ecosystem to which we have access, and as we move through our lives we engage in a dynamic process of reification and reconstruction of master narratives, each in dialogue with the others.

Although the authors of this essay have some characteristics in common, we do not share ethnic or religious identities; we come from different generations; and we were born in different countries, speaking different languages. And yet, despite that variation we

## Guest Perspective: Master Narrative


both internalized the master narrative that college was the best path for ourselves after high school, and that immediate enrollment at a prestigious, residential, 4-year college is the ideal for almost everyone. The master narrative of college going that we received also was linear – an uninterrupted path with few significant deviations. We absorbed a belief that most students would graduate on time and report a positive return on investment as their next life chapter begins, with a fulfilling, remunerative career, and a solid social network. This master narrative was built for each of us by different influencers (e.g., family members, the cultures of our high schools, the media) explicitly and implicitly, throughout childhood and adolescence. Through our research, we have heard that these messages are still being broadcast by parents and friends, more often by teachers and counselors, and certainly in popular media representations of postsecondary pathways.

Of course, contemporary high school graduates may struggle to reconcile their burgeoning pathways with these master narratives, in large part because the narratives exist as subtext. Indeed, part of the power of master narratives comes from their ubiquity and relative invisibility. Those of us with a vested interest in both our students' success and the success of our field likely also experience some inner conflict, and perhaps a range of emotions as we reflect on our own paths. After all, most of us have found some form of professional success, and perhaps

personal satisfaction, through advanced degrees. Such beliefs, however, may implicitly serve to perpetuate outdated master narratives for our students.

The distressing truth is that increasing numbers of students do not fit the storyline that we were given because college today is objectively out of reach financially for so many. Irrespective of financial barriers, many are overwhelmed with the academic or social experience, or are unable to engage due to mental or physical health concerns. Tens of thousands will continue to enroll and stop out each year (Causey et al., 2023), likely with debt but without a solid plan to return, necessitating a change in their narrative. Relying on population-level data on labor and wages (Carnevale, Cheah, & Wenzinger, 2021) we believe that a direct path through an affordable bachelor's degree program is still the optimal path – “nice work if you can get it” (Gershwin & Gershwin, 1937). Realistically, however, both survey and enrollment data suggest that increasing numbers of high school graduates are rejecting the college-going narrative entirely and may instead craft rich alternative stories that are fluid and non-linear. From what we can tell, among those who pursue a non-college pathway, their future education and training will almost certainly coexist alongside commitments to family and community, and changes in circumstances will necessitate revisiting and in some cases revising earlier decisions about where to live and what work to pursue (Education Strategy Group, n.d.).

## Guest Perspective: Master Narrative

Although a linear master narrative still dominates, it need not be determinative. As practitioners and researchers committed to college access and success, we need collectively to build new alternative narratives that fit a diverse student population. We must explicitly describe the wide range of possible storylines, highlighting that many are nonlinear and cyclical (Cortez, 2023). We must also amplify stories – successful and not – of those who pursued non-traditional paths. Doing so would have positive effects on both the individual and the community, by enabling narrative self-authorship -- a worthy developmental milestone for young adults (Kegan, 1994; Baxter Magolda, 1998) – and beginning to shift the master narratives with which each new class of students must contend. 

## REFERENCES

- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (1998). Developing self-authorship in young adult life. *Journal of College Student Development*, 39(2), 143-56.
- Bleemer, Z. (2022). Affirmative action, mismatch, and economic mobility after California's Proposition 209. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 137(1), 115-160.
- Brenan, M. (2023). Americans' confidence in higher education down sharply. Washington, D.C.: Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/508352/americans-confidence-higher-education-down-sharply.aspx>
- Carnevale, A.P., Cheah, B., & Wenzinger, E. (2021). *The college payoff: More education doesn't always mean more earnings*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.
- Carnevale, A.P., Mabel, Z., & Campbell, K.P. (2023). *Race-conscious affirmative action: What's next*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.
- Carnevale, A.P, Smith, N., Van Der Werf, M., & Quinn, M.C. (2023). *After everything: Projections of jobs, education, and training requirements through 2031*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.
- Causey, J., Gardner, A., Pevitz, A., Ryu, M., & Shapiro, D. (2023). *Some college, no credential student outcomes: Annual progress report – Academic Year 2021/22*. Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.
- Cortez, A. (2023). Admission virtual briefing: Beta by Bellwether. [https://bellwether.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/AdmissionVirtualBriefing\\_BetaByBellwether\\_May2023.pdf](https://bellwether.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/AdmissionVirtualBriefing_BetaByBellwether_May2023.pdf)
- ECMC Group (2023). *Question the quo: Gen Z teens have changed their priorities for education and work*. Minneapolis, MN: Author.
- Education Strategy Group (n.d.). *Multiple paths to success*. [https://edstrategy.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/ESG\\_5B\\_MultiplePathstoSuccess.pdf](https://edstrategy.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/ESG_5B_MultiplePathstoSuccess.pdf)
- Gallup & Lumina Foundation (2023). *The state of higher education 2023*. Washington, D.C.: Authors.
- Gershwin, G. & Gershwin, I. (1937). "Nice work if you can get it." New York: Gershwin Publishing Corp.
- Hammack, P. L. (2008). Narrative and the cultural psychology of identity. *Personality and social psychology review*, 12(3), 222-247.
- Haneman, V. J. (2022). *Dynasty 529 plans and structural inequality*. Washburn Law Journal. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4055735>
- Hicks, N., Addo, F., Price, A., & Darity Jr, W. (2021). *Still running up the down escalator: How narratives shape our understanding of racial wealth inequality*. Durham, N.C.: Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity.
- Houle, J. N., & Addo, F. R. (2019). Racial disparities in student debt and the reproduction of the fragile Black middle class. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 5(4), 562-577. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649218790989>
- Iloh, C. (2019). An alternative to college "choice" models and frameworks. *College and University*, 94(4), 2-9.



## Guest Perspective: Master Narrative

Jaschik, S. (March 13, 2019). Massive admissions scandal. Washington, D.C.: Inside Higher Ed. <https://ir.westcliff.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Massive-Admissions-Scandal.pdf>

June, A. W. & O'Leary, B. (December 12, 2023). Which colleges consider legacies in their admissions? Not just the ones you're thinking. Washington, D.C.: The Chronicle of Higher Education. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/which-colleges-consider-legacies-in-their-admissions-not-just-the-ones-youre-thinking>

Kegan, R. (1998). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Harvard University Press.

Kwakye, I., & Oliver, D. (2022). Intergenerational economic mobility of need-based financial aid recipients in Washington: Evidence from three years after postsecondary graduation. Olympia, WA: Washington Student Achievement Council.

McLean, K. C., & Syed, M. (2016). Personal, master, and alternative narratives: An integrative framework for understanding identity development in context. *Human Development*, 58(6), 318-349.

Opportunity@Work (n.d.). STARS: Skilled through alternative routes. Washington, D.C: Author. <https://opportunityatwork.org/stars/>

Perna, L. W. (2006). Studying college access and choice: A proposed conceptual model. In J.C. Smart (ed)., *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (pp. 99-157). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Postsecondary Value Commission. (2021). *Equitable value: Promoting economic mobility and social justice through postsecondary education*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Higher Education Policy.

Quadlin, N., & Powell, B. (2022). *Who should pay?: Higher education, responsibility, and the public*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Smalley, A. (2023). States consider elimination of degree requirements. Washington, D.C.: National Conference of State Legislatures. <https://www.ncsl.org/education/states-consider-elimination-of-degree-requirements>

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023). Earnings and unemployment rates by educational attainment, 2022. <https://www.bls.gov/emp/chart-unemployment-earnings-education.htm>

U.S. Department of Education (2023). Total fall enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by attendance status, sex of student, and control of institution: Selected years, 1947 through 2031 (Table 303.10). Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics. [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23\\_303.10.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_303.10.asp)

# Guest Perspective:

## *From Pre-College Grads to Undergrads: Encouraging Full-Time Enrollment after Summer Programs*



Authored by  
Meghan Buckley (Adelphi University)

### ABSTRACT

This guest perspective argues that converting in-person summer pre-college program participants into matriculated, degree-seeking undergraduate students at that same institution is a multi-step process that involves: 1) strategic pre-college program recruitment, 2) a curated and well-rounded summer pre-college experience that is both academically rigorous and socially dynamic, and 3) continued and consistent post-program engagement. It also argues that summer pre-college programs should work intentionally with Admissions departments during pre- and post-program development to create the most effective recruiting and enrollment pipelines from pre-college to eventual matriculation.

**Keywords:** precollege, summer programs, high school, conversion, enrollment

**H**igh school students choose to attend in-person summer pre-college programs for a variety of reasons: to boost their resumes for their eventual college applications, to challenge themselves academically, or to test drive being more independent in a new environment. The majority of students who participate in for-credit and non-credit summer pre-college programs are rising juniors and seniors in high school, many of whom are actively preparing to attend college the following fall. For these students in particular, a summer pre-college program serves as an important dress

rehearsal for two key elements: 1) the major they might like to pursue, and 2) the type of college or university they can picture themselves attending.

Summer pre-college programs geared toward high school students can therefore provide a key recruiting opportunity for colleges and universities; the students who consider, apply to, and ultimately attend these programs are likely already familiar with, and perhaps already interested in attending, the school itself. A survey conducted by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers in 2018 found that 70% of the 451 schools surveyed either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that pre-college programs are an important part of the enrollment pipeline at their institution (AACRAO, 2018). However, that same survey also uncovered that three-quarters of the institutions who participated reported that less than 24% of their 2017 undergraduate applicants had participated in a summer pre-college program, let alone one at the institution(s) to which they were applying (AACRAO, 2018).

Arguably, converting summer pre-college program participants into matriculated,

## Perspective: From Pre-College Grads to Undergrads

degree-seeking undergraduate students at that same institution is a multi-step process that involves: 1) strategic pre-college program recruitment, 2) a curated and well-rounded summer pre-college experience that is both academically rigorous and socially dynamic, and 3) continued and consistent post-program engagement. Such factors not only attract students to apply to and participate in your institution's summer pre-college program in the first place, but they can also convert students who may have applied to your institution's summer program for general reasons such as cost or timeframe to strongly consider, and ultimately attend, your institution for their undergraduate degree.

### Strategic Recruiting

Many different factors influence which in-person summer pre-college program(s) high school students apply to including: the school's location, the cost and length of the program, the program offerings, if the program is credit-bearing or not, and if residential and commuter options are available, among others. Your institution's campus style also likely plays a large role for many pre-college program applicants considering a four-year degree. Students looking for a particular type of undergraduate experience – at larger vs. smaller institutions, schools nearby vs. cross-country, as well as schools with specific degree offerings, facilities, and/or academic or social support services – may be drawn to your pre-college program to experience these elements on a trial basis, whether or not they are strongly

considering applying to or attending your school as an undergrad.

With hundreds of summer pre-college programs for high school students to choose from, ensuring the application and deposit process for your school's program is straightforward and personalized will help attract a larger number of applicants. Simple tweaks such as opening your applications as early as possible in the fall semester (i.e. October-November) and closing applications as late as possible in the late spring or early summer (i.e. May-June) allows the widest net to be cast. Implementing a quick turnaround from acceptance to required deposit encourages accepted students to "lock-in" with your summer program as opposed to weighing their options elsewhere.

Personalized outreach in the form of a phone call or an individual email to an accepted applicant and their parent(s) from the pre-college program director can result in an accepted applicant's positive association with the institution and incentivize them to commit. Lastly, being hyper-accessible and forthcoming about your summer pre-college program with those who are considering applying or who have been accepted via offering tailored campus tours, connecting families with relevant faculty, departments, and support services, sharing past course syllabi and schedules and/or hosting monthly virtual information sessions can also be highly effective enrollment tactics.

## Perspective: From Pre-College Grads to Undergrads

Further, although fewer than one-third of pre-college programs report through admissions and recruiting, colleges and universities would do well to work in tandem with their admissions departments to plan summer pre-college program offerings and develop recruitment strategies that are in line with their institution's degree programs and that are responsive to feedback from prospective students (AACRAO, 2018). What majors are on the rise, both nationally and at your institution? What unique courses, resources, and characteristics does your school have that your pre-college program can showcase? If your institution lacks a particular degree program, what kinds of articulations and affiliations are in place with other institutions that can provide access to those post-graduate pathways so that students can still attend your school and achieve their desired degree or other professional certification(s)? Your summer pre-college program curriculum should highlight these opportunities, allowing high school students to learn about their course subject material and also the unique resources your institution has, more broadly, to help them picture themselves within a particular major track and the value of doing so at your institution as opposed to elsewhere.

### **A Dynamic Summer Pre-College Program Experience**

Ensuring that the pre-college program itself is an educational and enjoyable experience is the second step in converting a summer pre-college student into a matriculated degree-

seeking student in the near future. In addition to working with faculty members to develop pre-college program courses and academic offerings that are appropriately challenging and engaging for high school students, the program should also complement this with easy access to additional academic support. Pre-college program students who are privy to the kinds of academic support that fully matriculated students would have access to such as a writing center, [group] study spaces equipped with smart boards or other collaborative learning technology, and faculty and teaching assistant office hours encourages those students to have the mindset of an undergraduate enrolled during the regular semester as opposed to a high school student participating in a summer program.

When it comes to conversion, however, the social elements of the summer pre-college program are key. Though the summer months are often quieter for most institutions, strategically hosting your summer pre-college program during the week(s) of the summer that are busiest with other groups and events can help the high school students participating picture themselves on your campus in the bustling fall and spring semesters as a full-time student. At my own institution, I have found that summer pre-college students are just as interested, if not more interested, in the University's facilities for recreation and dining, as well as the community surrounding the campus, as they are in their pre-college program course. Off-campus trips to nearby New York City for a

## Perspective: From Pre-College Grads to Undergrads

Broadway show or to see a baseball game, as well as shuttles to the downtown area adjacent to the University, help students see how a college student is also part of a campus community and the surrounding area.

Additionally, institutions interested in increasing their rates of conversion can and should capitalize on the typically involved presence of parents and guardians during the pre-college program experience, as high school students often rely on their parents and guardians to help choose which schools to apply to, attend, and, oftentimes, help fund their undergraduate degree. While less than half of the pre-college programs surveyed by AARCAO in 2018 included an admissions presentation, institutions who incorporate elements such as campus tours of new and relevant facilities for specific programs and majors, as well as presentations with the offices of admissions and financial aid, at program orientation and closing create a natural link between pre-college and eventual matriculation (AACRAO, 2018). Invitations to executive leadership and college deans to these events are also excellent ways to engage summer pre-college students and parents while they are already on campus and are a captive audience. Lastly, all summer pre-college programs should not allow their high school students to say farewell without having them complete an exit evaluation with specific questions related to conversion (i.e. “How likely were you to apply to X University prior to your summer pre-college program experience? How likely are you to apply now?”).

### Continued (and Consistent) Post-Program Engagement


A student’s completion of a summer pre-college program is hopefully just the beginning of their relationship with that institution if a tactical follow-up plan for continued engagement is implemented. This follow-up should be highly curated and remind your pre-college program “graduates” that their past participation in your program gives them a uniquely informed head start on the path to an undergraduate degree at your school. Post-program scholarships and financial aid in the form of application fee waivers and automatically awarded pre-college “alumni” scholarships are simple and effective ways to encourage students to apply and/or matriculate. At Adelphi, we recently created a past participant communication plan for former pre-college students who are current seniors, as well as for their parents and guardians. These communications come from myself, as the program director, and are more personalized than the general emails from our Admissions department, reminding these students of the fee waiver and scholarship opportunities reserved for them and offering to connect them with our faculty and advising services. For summer pre-college program alumni who are not yet seniors in high school, staying in touch to remind them of other summer and regular semester opportunities that apply to them including summer research opportunities, weekend enrichment programs, and course auditing are simple ways to maintain and grow your relationship.



## Perspective: From Pre-College Grads to Undergrads

Using the tactics above over the past two summers since Adelphi has returned to an in-person summer pre-college program model, post-pandemic, has yielded impactful results. After summer 2022, 63% of the rising seniors who participated in the summer pre-college program applied to Adelphi the following fall (39 out of 62 eligible students). Of those students who applied, we saw approximately 25% of them matriculate (10 out of 39 students), with 90% of those students enrolling with the same major as what they studied during their summer pre-college program (9 out of 10 students).

### Conclusion

Conversion is a multi-step process that requires strategic involvement of pre-college program directors and admissions departments before, during, and after a summer pre-college program takes place. Regardless of where your institution's summer pre-college program is housed, working with admissions departments regularly to tailor and update your summer pre-college offerings can keep them relevant with trending topics and careers, while also staying true to your institution's academic abilities and limitations. Creating a summer pre-college program experience that has a variety of academic offerings, session dates, and price points is the first step to attracting students and parents to your program; allowing the relationship to grow after the program concludes can help convert your pre-college grads to undergrads. 

### REFERENCES

American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO). "Pre-College Programs: Results of the AACRAO 2018 60-Second Survey." 2018. [aacrao.org/docs/default-source/research-docs/pre-college-programs-report-nbsp---march-60-second-survey.pdf?sfvrsn=1eb2478b\\_8](https://aacrao.org/docs/default-source/research-docs/pre-college-programs-report-nbsp---march-60-second-survey.pdf?sfvrsn=1eb2478b_8)