ONE POWERFUL VOICE

COLLEGE TRANSITION SPECIALISTS:
GUIDING STUDENTS “TO & THROUGH” COLLEGE
High school graduation is an exhilarating time for students and their families, as well as for school faculty and district personnel. In a district where a college-going culture exists for all students, most high school graduates have already earned some college credit, and many have been accepted into institutions of higher education. Some students need only a few more credits before earning associate degrees while others need only two more years of college credit to earn bachelors’ degrees.

Despite the fact that many graduates were already on their way to earn college degrees by high school graduation, when district leaders began to ask where their students were the following fall, they discovered an unexpected trend: there were noticeable declines in the number of seniors who reported their intent to go to college compared to actual attendance in college courses. This left leadership wondering: what caused the transition between high school and college to be a challenge for students?

As described by participants engaged at a round table discussion during the College for All Conference hosted by Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District, there were many contributing factors to the gap between high school senior intent and higher education attendance:

- Money
- Transportation
- Starting work
- Family situations
- Fear
- Unexpected barriers
  - Lack of parental support
  - Military
  - Pregnancy
  - Incomplete college registration
- Unfamiliarity with the college/university
  - Unsure of how to navigate the college campus
  - Difficulty navigating college bureaucracy
  - Missteps made during the admission process
  - A decision made to take time off from school

What could be done to support these students? And who was responsible for providing the support?
How do DISTRICTS SUPPORT STUDENTS as they NAVIGATE “TO AND THROUGH” INSTITUTIONS of HIGHER EDUCATION?

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, Educate Texas, in partnership with Jobs for the Future (JFF), committed in earnest to a five-year, multi-district Investing in Innovation Early College Expansion Partnership (i3 ECEP) grant. This effort aimed for 90 percent of early college high school students to compete at least one advanced course. Increasing the number of students with advanced course credit would not only enhance the high school experience for students, but it would also impact college readiness, graduation rates, college success and student lifetime earning potential.

The 90 percent goal meant all school and district leaders needed to invest in the shared vision by transforming governance structures, relying more heavily on data to identify progress in relation to the goals and integrating systematic support to ensure that students were successful on the Texas Success Initiative assessments. As structures and procedures were put in place to meet this goal, it became increasingly clear that students would also need support transitioning to college culture and systems. It was not the district’s responsibility to help students with this transition, neither was it the responsibility of the institutions of higher education. However, leadership felt it was critical to support students in learning to translate success in advanced and dual-credit courses to graduation from a college or university.

Onboarding students to college and university needed to happen during the spring semester of high school graduation and throughout the summer months to combat some of the challenges that led students to forego college and university enrollment in the months after graduation.
College Transition Specialists would serve as liaisons between students and their families and the college they planned to attend. By partnering with traditional high school counselors and college counselors, Specialists would provide the bridge to help students transition from high school to college or university. The College Transition Specialists provided services such as:

- **COLLEGE ADVISING**
- **COLLEGE APPLICATIONS**
- **FINANCIAL AID APPLICATIONS**
- **NOTARIZATION**
- **ONGOING MONITORING**
- **COLLEGE PLACEMENT EXAM**

College Transition Specialists receive training from the U.S. Department of Education about student financial aid and from partnering institutions of higher education about the comprehensive academic advising system where students could track credits earned, credits remaining and progress towards degree completion.

**STUDENT FINANCIAL AID SUPPORT**

Students need to have tax transcripts notarized to submit with their financial aid applications. As certified notary agents, College Transition Specialists can notarize student documents when necessary and support them with the entire submission process.

**SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS ON ACADEMIC PROBATION**

Several students on academic probation had left college to work full time. College Transition Specialists continued to work with these students to identify why they were on academic probation and what options were available to get them reenrolled.
Throughout the school year, College Transition Specialists support academic counselors by visiting high schools and giving classroom presentations about college. They also survey seniors to collect their personal information to provide continued support throughout the summer after high school graduation. College Transition Specialists recruit and organize local college representatives to participate in district college night, school FASFA night, and decision day. College Transition Specialists have access to each student’s dashboard—a tool created by the district to support transparent communication and progress monitoring. Student dashboards provide information about students’ individual indicators for college readiness including:

- Texas Success Initiative Assessment scores
- SAT and ACT scores
- State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) end-of-course tests scores
- Student transcripts
- Dual-credit or advanced courses completed by the student

The dashboard also reveals whether students have successfully completed financial aid applications. With access to this information, College Transition Specialists work with students to answer questions and cross-check these questions and other needs with those related to college admission and continuous college enrollment. Reciprocally, College Transition Specialists input descriptive data into dashboards after meeting with students that then assists high school counselors.

To maintain ongoing communication with students, College Transition Specialists realized quickly that mass email and mass text were not the best modes of communication. With nearly all teens spending much of their days online, social media became a necessary tool to disseminate information during students’ transition to college. As a result, College Transition Specialists created accounts on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter and made use of the text app Remind to share reminders, invite students to special events and to communicate general college announcements and information. In addition, students could use these platforms to send private messages to pose questions to the College Transition Specialists and schedule appointments using a scheduling system called Calendly. The College Transition Specialists are highly active on social media to appeal to and reach students in the spaces where they gather to learn and interact.

College Transition Specialists support students during the summer after graduation as they begin to experience freedom from high school, and when the enthusiasm for sitting in a college classroom can begin to lose its luster. College Transition Specialists host a college orientation workshop during the summer months for all students who plan to attend college. The orientation reviews what students need to do to prepare to transition to college and helps students and their families with specific questions they have about the transition. College Transition Specialists also provide targeted messages to students about registration deadlines, support to complete federal financial aid applications and dates for college orientation. This targeted outreach takes place via text, phone and email.
College Transition Specialists were originally funded through a grant from the Texas Education Agency and supported by Governor Rick Perry’s office in 2010. After the grant cycle ended, the importance of the College Transition Specialists to the overall vision of the district and health of the community was evident. College Transition Specialists did not replace traditional high school counselors; rather, they worked on high school campuses and with college counselors at institutions of higher education. Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District’s four transition counselors are now fully sustained by local funding.

Connecting with students throughout their college careers is of critical importance for students who are unaware of how to navigate the college landscape. College Transition Specialists provide ongoing advising in addition to the support that students receive from their college advisors. While students are in college, Transition Specialists help them find peer mentors and conduct progress monitoring based on information shared by the institution of higher education. College Transition Specialists are familiar with comprehensive college advising software, which tracks students’ progress towards their declared degrees. With this information, Specialists have conversations with students to reinforce recommendations from college counselors and answer questions based on their intimate understanding of each student’s situation.

Additionally, College Transition Specialists advise continuing education students who deferred college attendance or completion. They work with these students to counsel them on how to manage their college schedules by returning to school and perhaps taking fewer courses and/or taking advantage of the available college support resources. College Transition Specialists also review credit-bearing courses in which students may have earned a ‘D’ or ‘F’ and discuss options for retaking the course.

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College Transition Specialists support students in navigating through the many unknown processes and barriers that are traditionally encountered as students transition into their various institutions of higher education. They provide the necessary supports for students as they learn how college is different than their high schools and realize that they have a much greater responsibility to determine their own futures.

If students do not enroll in college in the fall following their graduation, their likelihood for enrolling in college drops drastically. Therefore, increasing the number of students who successfully make the transition from high school to college is critical to achieve the goal of getting all students “to and through” college.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

- How might your district support students as they transition to an institution of higher education after acceptance?
- Do you know where your students are after their first year of college?
- How might students in your district benefit from the support of a College Transition Specialist?
- Are students able to identify support personnel and systems in the district that can help them with college once they graduate from high school?
Educate Texas is a public-private initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas that works to strengthen the public and higher education system in Texas so that every student is prepared for and succeeds in school, in the workforce and in life. For over a decade, Educate Texas has helped guide schools, districts and higher education institutions through the process of designing early college schools, implementing effective governance structures and strengthening instruction and student support. Educate Texas has supported the districtwide implementation of early college in Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District (PSJA ISD) since 2008. As part of the Early College Expansion Partnership, Educate Texas has played a central role in technical assistance and instructional coaching in PSJA ISD and Brownsville ISD.

Jobs for the Future (JFF) has played a leading role in launching and shaping early colleges nationwide since 2002, when it became coordinator of the Early College High School Initiative, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. More recently, JFF and partners have focused on adapting early college designs to new contexts and on informing state and federal policies to bring high-quality dual enrollment and early college opportunities to more students. In the ECEP districts, JFF has provided strategic advising to central office staff along with leadership coaching for principals and instructional coaching for teachers.

This topic briefing is the fourth of a four-part series created by Educate Texas to disseminate lessons learned from the Early College Expansion Partnership. For more information, visit edtx.org.