

Knowledge for Practice:

A Training Program for College Access Advisors

Abstract: Social and environmental factors, unique to many first-generation college students and other at-risk youth, complicate the job of college advising. This study provides program design, and teaching topics and techniques to further sensitize advisors to social, emotional, and cultural factors that impact their work.

Chester is a 6th grade student. Although he tends to get silly in the classroom, he is a hard-working student. It does not appear that he has any strong school friendships. Chester has asthma, but it is under control if he takes his medication regularly. His mother is the head of his household. She is working on a GED and is in a job-training program. Chester's mother consistently fails to show up for parent meetings, even though she receives information about the meeting and indicates her intention to attend. When contacted, she sounds stressed and overwhelmed, but not unfriendly. She says, "I just don't have it all together these days." Chester has repeatedly missed field trips because permission forms are not returned to school. He is disappointed and frustrated, but tends to respond to his advisor with, "No one told me that I had to have that signed!" In general, school officials have had little contact with the family. Someone in the school thinks his mother was in a special education class before she dropped out of school.

What educational support can Chester's mother provide if her own experience was that of a marginal student with low expectations of college attendance? Do her own struggles with academic success influence her attitude toward her son's educational experience? With knowledge of the

mother's commitment to earning a GED and participation in a job-training program, a college advisor can more accurately interpret a parent's seeming lack of support for the student's college goals.

Sabrina has a 3.9 GPA and an ACT score of 25. Her family immigrated recently to the United States and she is often called upon to translate for family members. Sabrina has few friends, as she spends a significant amount of her time helping in the family business. She has had minimal contact with her advisor and has done little to follow through on college plans. However, she has told teachers and classmates that she is going to attend a particular college, although she has not yet been accepted. Sabrina previously indicated to her advisor that her family expects her to work in the family business upon graduation from high school.

Sabrina is clearly caught between two worlds and is finding it difficult to bridge the gap. Additionally, the family may be disadvantaged if they lose their translator. In relation to educational opportunities, a college advisor could play the role of intermediary between the outside world and the student's responsibilities to the family. The advisor could also serve as an advocate for this outstanding student. The primary

goal of college access service is to break down barriers to higher education for students considered to be “at-risk” because of their social or economic backgrounds. Low-income students, first-generation students (those whose parents did not attend college) and underrepresented groups, such as African Americans and Latinos, have a more difficult time than their peers completing high school, and applying to and entering college (Kezar, 2000; Swail, Redd and Perna, 2003). Enrollment rates for African American and Latino students are proportionately lower than their Caucasian counterparts, even though minority enrollments have risen over the past several decades (Swail, Redd and Perna, 2003). In the last decade, college access programs have expanded to provide the support needed to make a college education a reality for many of these students.



College access programs (also known as early intervention programs) provide college counseling, financial aid counseling, academic support, and family guidance to enable students to complete requirements for college application and admission.¹ These programs augment those services typically available through high school guidance offices, targeting students who are most likely to benefit from a one-to-one advising relationship.

¹ See ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education (2002) for a bibliography of resources on types of college access models and initiatives (<http://www.eric.org/crif/early.html>).

Today's urban and inner-ring suburban students face a number of barriers to higher education, both in and outside the classroom (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1997; 2002). Many low-income and first-generation students lack the college admission information they need. In their decision to pursue college, some low-income youth may be stigmatized and lack the support of their peers and family members. The job of college advising is made even more complex by social and environmental factors that place youth at risk, such as family violence, family disruption and poverty.

College access programs address these barriers along the path to college. College advisors' support of students during the application process can increase the odds of enrolling in a four-year college (Choy, 2002; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2001). The purpose of the following training program was to assist college access advisors in responding to social, emotional and cultural factors that impact their work.

Agency Setting

Cleveland Scholarship Programs (CSP), the first postsecondary access program, founded in 1967, collaborated on and implemented a training program that now serves as a model for other access programs throughout the United States. The mission of CSP is to provide educational workforce development for Greater Cleveland through a broad range of financial aid and advisory services. Financial services include financial aid advising, information about alternative financial resources and direct scholarship assistance. Advisory services include providing information, and individual and group advising for students to enable them to access educational options beyond high school. CSP advisors supplement services provided by school staff guidance counselors.

In a typical academic year, CSP serves approximately 31,000 students in 65 schools county-wide—public urban, public-suburban and parochial elementary, middle and high schools. Most of the student population comes from low-income, single-parent and minority households. Some of the participating urban school districts have lower-than-average attendance and high school graduation rates. Students who eventually matriculate to a postsecondary institution (and receive grants from CSP) have higher-than-average persistence rates from their freshman to sophomore years of college.

CSP's advisors have, at minimum, a bachelor's degree, strong communications skills, experience working with students and their parents/guardians, and computer skills.

Degrees vary. The experience levels of candidates are wide-ranging; entry-level candidates seeking full-time and retired professionals seeking part-time work are typical. Several advisors report that they were CSP “last dollar” scholarship recipients as undergraduates, appreciate the help of their advisors, and want to work in the growing field of college access. Another common ground, for those who become advisors, is interest in/passion for CSP’s mission.

When CSP implemented the training program, they experienced growth in the number of middle schools served. Consequently, the larger caseloads led advisors to find even more efficient ways to deal with their students. Advisors felt the need for more information about common issues and obstacles in implementing the program: lack of parent involvement, developmental needs of middle school age students, and peer pressure among others.

Designing the Training

The training concept, as the college access program originally developed it, was a broad approach to transmitting “best practice” skills and a formal body of essential knowledge to college access advisors. The first goal was to professionalize the work of the advisors, and utilize social work techniques and knowledge in working with students. The access program representatives wanted to create a training program they could provide to all incoming advisors. It was important to discern universal topics, while still being specific enough to address the day-to-day issues advisors faced. Some initial topics considered were basic counseling skills; college access advocacy within multiple systems; human development and diversity; health and human services issues that hamper college access, such as family disruption; and specialized college access areas, such as financial aid requirements.

A small panel of seasoned program advisors convened during the first year of training. These discussions evolved a clear set of objectives, which were to provide information to advisors, about social and family issues that influence student motivation; to further education; and to participate in college and financial aid advising. Although the majority of CSP advisors were not social workers, they often found themselves in the front-line, confronting social, family and community issues that impacted their students. To teach how to best maneuver through these situations, the panel designed modules.

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information needs during the first year of the training program, based on the feedback and suggestions of the advisory planning committee. The initial nine modules included Understanding Appreciative Inquiry and the Learning Styles Inventory; Social Networks and Social Support; Communication; Working Effectively Within School Systems; Developmental Issues of Middle and High School Students; Diversity; Conflict Resolution; Advising; and Transition to College and College Persistence. Regular planning meetings continued with the program managers, advisors and trainers to determine training needs for future sessions. Ultimately, the three-year program yielded 21 modules, totaling 78 hours of direct training time (See Table 1 online*). The training program applied for and received approval from the state counselor and social worker board to offer continuing education credits for professional development, and credentialing purposes for social workers, counselors and educators. The advisors’ work in the areas, listed below, required skills and knowledge beyond the typical job description.

The training conveyed key concepts of prejudice, discrimination, oppression, and privilege, and examined misconceptions, stereotypes, and cultural programming. The module explored cultural influences affecting workplace behaviors through experiential exercises and then placed special focus on gender-role socialization and myths.

Diversity

With a better understanding of structural and cultural barriers, advisors can assist students to make more informed choices and to navigate the transition from high school to college more effectively. This module reinforced cross-cultural effectiveness as a key advising skill and asserted that diversity, within the group of advisors, was a resource for the entire program. The module began with diversity awareness of assumptions, expectations and biases. The training conveyed key concepts of prejudice, discrimination, oppression, and privilege, and examined misconceptions, stereotypes, and cultural programming. The module explored cultural influences affecting workplace behaviors through experiential exercises and then placed special focus on gender-role socialization and myths. Case examples included expectations of female students, the experiences of homosexual students, gender-related competition and male student attitudes, and struggles in the larger culture. The module also highlighted cultural barriers to success, gaining cultural capital, methods for choosing the right campus, and African American and Latino students and the barriers they face on predominantly Caucasian campuses.

Parent Involvement

Other advisor responsibilities are to create accessible opportunities for parents, to assess parent-school relationships and to find ways to overcome barriers to parent involvement. This module focused on parents' roles in students' academic success. The home environment is important in determining which students apply for college (Stringer, Cunningham, O'Brien & Merisotis, 1998). Parent involvement may be an effective means to overcome the educational disadvantage that low-income and minority youth experience.

Networking in the Schools

This module dealt with the complexity and political nature of working relationships within the school. The advisors were asked to consider which relationships were essential to their success and the best ways to nurture and develop these relationships. The focus of this module was on the environment in which the advisor worked, in contrast to other training modules that focused on the advisor as an individual. Through guided exercises, advisors set action goals for marketing, conducted a marketing audit for the product of college access advising, identified the public for the program, and developed a promotional campaign for their program, hoping, as a result, to create a strong presence in the school.

Implementing the Curriculum: Participation of Management and Staff in Planning Training Sessions

CSP managers and training program managers met generally three to four weeks prior to the delivery of each module. The meetings provided opportunities to focus on relevant issues at that point in the life of the program. The planning group would often brainstorm vignettes that could be used for training.

The group developed a schedule for the training session. The trainers requested that all CSP business be presented at the beginning of the day so that the training would flow uninterrupted. This continuity of theme proved to be a strength of the program, as advisors were able to focus on the training issues rather than daily mechanics of program management.

Learning Styles

Advisors took The Kolb Learning Styles Inventory (Kolb, 1999) during the first session. This instrument assesses an individual's style of learning, whether by reflection, thinking, doing, or experiencing. It also addresses how the individual solves problems, manages conflict, works in teams, and negotiates personal and professional relationships.



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This activity presented the advisors with their first opportunity to interact as a group with a common purpose—with a long-term professional development focus. Prior to this event, the advisors worked in their individual schools and gathered for staff meetings on a quarterly basis. They had never before come together as a learning group. Since they worked in a

host setting, they often felt like “visitors” in their assigned schools, isolated in the school setting as well as isolated from their fellow CSP advisors. Coming together for the training sessions provided the advisors with the opportunity to express these feelings and observations. One of the ways to bridge this sense of isolation was to ask for successful techniques used by advisors. The advisors enjoyed sharing these “war stories” and tended to build easier communication based on similar experiences.



Use of Case Studies

The group of advisors proved to be a generally mature, spontaneous group who preferred hands on, tangible and relevant dialogue. Theoretical discussions were fine up to a point, but the group became impatient to apply the theories to reality. Case studies were an invaluable tool for group engagement and discussion of theoretical and developmental issues.

A case study that generated heated and diverse dialogue was presented in the first year, during the module on Developmental Issues of Middle and High School Students. The

learning objectives of this module were to understand the developmental tasks and issues of this age group and to identify and address major risk factors impeding academic success. The goal of the case study was to surface the issues of physical development, social and environmental culture and risk factors, and psychological trauma.

According to the 4th grade proficiency tests, Mary, who is Latino, was academically on track. She did quite well and showed all the signs of being engaged in and enthusiastic about her schoolwork. Now in the 7th grade, Mary's grades have dropped significantly and her attitude has been described as "withdrawn." During a tearful session, she shared with her advisor the fact that she had been raped. When she shared the information with her mother, the attitude was generally, "So, what?"

Issues that emerged in discussion were both technical and moral: legal boundaries of an advisor's position, duty to report, standards of "normal" in different cultures, isolation of first-generation college students from their family of origin, sexual awareness and developmental issues of students, importance of the monitoring of grades/continuity of advisor of targeted CSP students, and appropriate use of community resources.

Panel Discussion

Advisors were anxious to "share their stories" and hear how other advisors had dealt with similar issues. As a result of this interest, the program coordinators asked CSP managers to recommend advisors who had proven successes in dealing with some of the obstacles inherent in the job. These advisors were then asked to prepare a short summary of their technique and asked to present those at the next training session.

Evaluation of the Training

At the conclusion of each training module, participants were asked to evaluate the content as well as the presentation skills of the trainer. Overall, 73 percent of the advisors reported that the information presented was relevant to their work and important to share with parents and their students and 75 percent of the advisors viewed the topics selected as useful.

Lessons Learned

- Orient trainers prior to each session. New trainers benefit from a copy of the mission statement of CSP as well as advisor job descriptions. It is also helpful to apprise trainers of the general culture of the program as well as a summary of the issues and concerns raised at the planning meeting.

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Trainers are then able to customize their module to the real needs of the advisors. This orientation, plus meetings with CSP staff, often allowed other pertinent management issues to be brought to the forefront of the group for a facilitated discussion, tied to the module topic.

- Strive for "just in time" delivery of training modules. In planning the year's schedule of modules, it is important to be mindful of the workflow of the college application and admission process. For example, a module on financial aid is best presented early in the school year so that advisors are able to immediately apply what they have learned. As the year progresses, advisors are faced with issues specific to the developmental and social situations facing the students as they move through the school year.



- Include time in each session for advisors to share information with one another. They found this to be a way to get to know one another and to compare each other's school placement situations.
- Remain flexible and responsive to the immediate and changing needs confronting advisors and students. One of the main characteristics of the training is its relevance and timeliness. Armed with the information from the pre-module planning meeting, and through current communication with CSP administrators, coordinators are in a position to alter case studies or portions of each module.
- Recognize that it is often difficult for advisors to apply training content to their school setting. Trainers should encourage advisors to think of potential solutions i.e., small steps they can take to reach their goal, what needs to be accomplished first and who can help to implement a plan.
- Be clear about session expectations and provide a rationale for what can and cannot be covered. Start the session with group participation, setting expectations and goals for the day's training. Check back with those goals and expectations throughout the training. This is another area where it is important for the trainer to be flexible. The group's needs may be somewhat different than the original goals of the trainer. With flexibility, the trainer can reshape his or her agenda.

Implications for Future Training

As stated earlier, advisors viewed the information provided as timely and relevant to their work. However, evaluations of future training should include advisors' use of training content and techniques on the job, and the impact of the training on advising

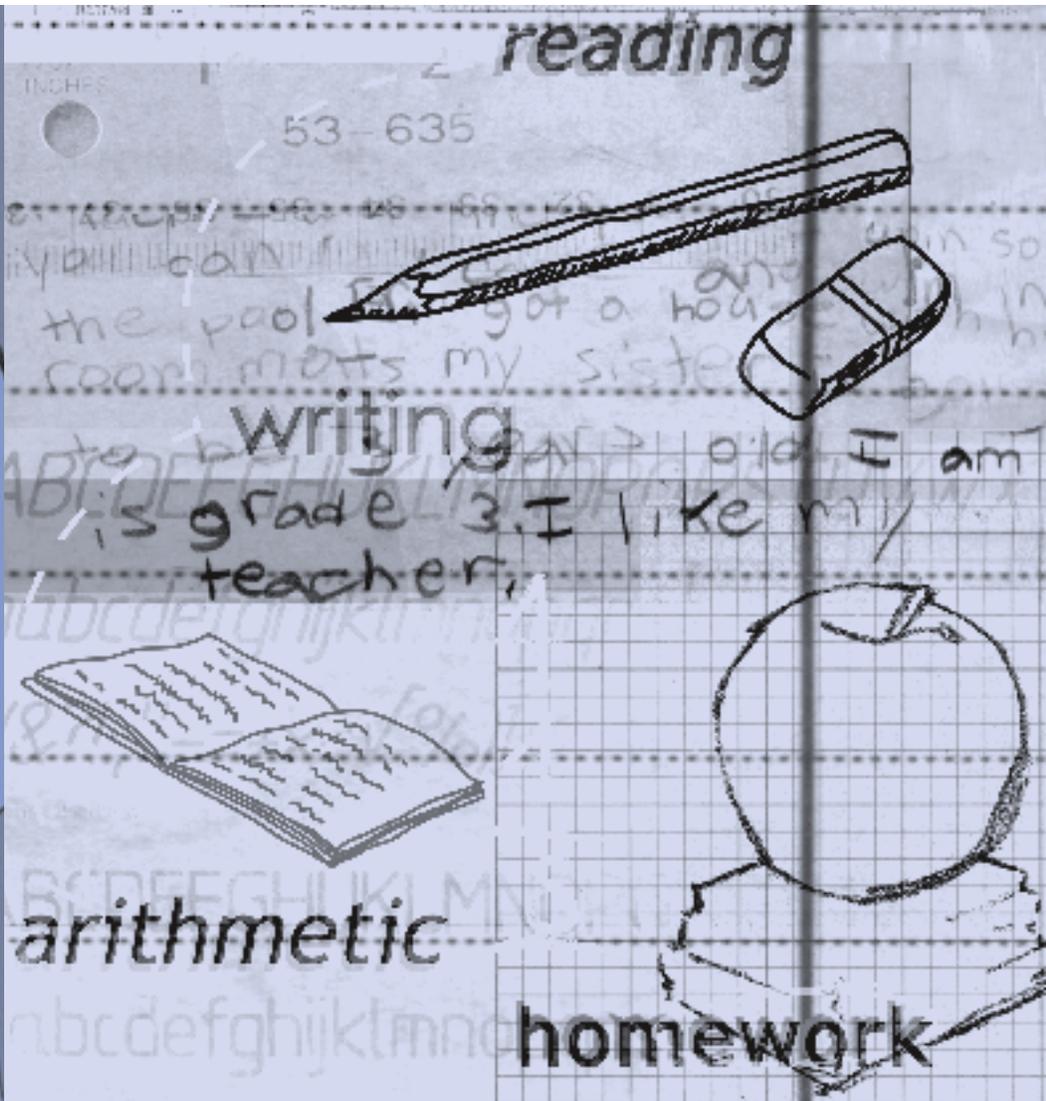
and advising outcomes. In addition to the training topics covered in this program, future training modules may want to consider additional topics in such areas as teen pregnancy, alcohol and drug addiction, grief and loss, suicide, and other crisis intervention situations. As the student population changes in response to evolving economics or demographic conditions, the training content must be revised accordingly to keep it current and relevant. In essence, our complex society, with its educational, social, environmental, economic, and historical pressures, warrants new collaborations. The educational process must be viewed in a social and environmental context. The field of social work has research and theory to impart that is directly applicable to today's educational atmosphere.

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To download Table 1, Training Program Modules and Objectives, please visit www.nacac.com/news_journal_inthisissue.html.

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