Assessing college-going culture- Development of diagnostic rubric

Eric Bettinger, PhD- Stanford University
Anthony Antonio, PhD- Stanford University
Jesse Foster, PhD- Evaluation and Assessment Solutions for Education
Erin Grogan, PhD- College Advising Corps

Introduction

Many high school students who will be the first in their family to attend college may lack mentors, advocates, and other knowledgeable adults who can assist them in navigating the college admissions process. Thus, they benefit from attending a school rich in "college-going culture" (CGC). Prior research defines CGC as an environment in which "adults and peers see college-going as expected and attainable, and where they see the effort and persistence that preparation for college requires as normal" (Oakes et al., 2002; p. 108). The complexity of college admissions can hinder academically qualified students (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006), but prior research has shown that when students have access to supportive adults providing information and assistance for key activities, such as filing FAFSA, financial aid receipt and college enrollment increase (Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, & Sanbonmatsu, 2012). College access programs providing this support can be critical partners in building CGC, and thus, increasing the chances that first-generation students enroll in college. Bowen, McPherson, & Chingos (2009) find that strong CGC is the best predictor of whether students will take necessary steps to apply for college. This mixed-methods study utilizes case study data from high schools served by a national nonprofit offering college advising to create a new diagnostic instrument to measure research-based dimensions of CGC.

Objectives

This study was designed to understand the extent to which a representative sample of schools served by college advisers displayed elements of CGC. The evaluation had two goals:

1. Use rich case study data to outline tangible elements of CGC; and
2. Develop a diagnostic tool for schools to self-assess culture and create a plan for improvement

Methods

Data Collection. During two years of evaluation (2017-18 and 2018-19), researchers conducted in-depth, week-long visits at seven N.C. high schools served by a national college access nonprofit to develop a comprehensive model of "college-going culture."

To identify potential schools, National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data was used to identify higher and lower-performing schools by the change in their overall college-going rate and the four-year college enrollment rate (see Appendix Table 1 for sample metrics used for site selection). Additionally, college readiness metrics (SAT/ACT participation rate, AP participation rate) were used as a proxy for a school's CGC. Schools with comparatively higher percentages in both college-going rates and college readiness measures and those that had comparatively lower percentages in both these areas, were selected, resulting in four higher-performing and three lower-performing schools of similar size and demographic characteristics.

Data collection focused on two main activities:

- A total of 235 participants (teachers, administrators, school counselors, students, parents, and the college adviser) took part in group and individual interviews (see Appendix Table 2). Interview protocols developed for this project served to identify organizational practices around college-going (e.g., to what extent are lower-classmen involved in college preparation; what school wide discussions about college preparation took place), as well as organizational values (e.g., what postsecondary expectations does the school have for its students).
- Researchers conducted observations of interactions between college advisers and students, using custom interview and notetaking protocols, during approximately 35 school days across two school years.

Mixed methods analysis and rubric development. A two-person coding team utilized a coding protocol to categorize the interviews and observation notes into four key elements of CGC, described in more detail in the results section below.

Using the results from the qualitative analysis and prior research on CGC, researchers developed a diagnostic rubric intended for schools to use as a self-assessment of CGC. This survey instrument asked a set of questions in each of the four focal areas described in the results section below, piloted with college advisers and other school stakeholders beginning in Fall 2019. Pilot testing the rubric allowed for assessment of

reliability and internal validity, using factor analysis to ensure that survey items mapped as hypothesized onto the four components described below. Analysis results allowed for a streamlined, practitioner-friendly version of the diagnostic rubric, which will be shared during this session.

Results

Qualitative analysis identified three key elements of CGC:

- Values- *Postsecondary expectations, priorities, and aspirations among students, parents, and staff;*
- Structure- *The school's college preparation structure, which refers to who is involved and how in college preparation, and what resources are allocated*; and
- Environmental Stability- *Changes in or challenges related to school staffing and academics, the student population, and the surrounding community.*

A fourth factor- fragmentation- was also developed because analysis revealed that particular types of students (e.g., high performing students enrolled in AP courses) were likely to receive different types of college-going messages than others). Common inconsistencies leading to fragmentation of resources were driven by student GPA, grade level, and perceived "motivation."

Case study schools were assessed on these domains and classified into one of three CGC typologies (see Appendix Table 3): post-secondary forward, post-secondary debating, and post-secondary struggling.

As noted above, the key components of CGC were translated into a diagnostic survey to help school staff self-assess CGC in their buildings. At the conclusion of each of the survey sections (values, structure, environmental stability, and fragmentation), respondents receive a description of what their responses indicate about their CGC. Once all of their sections have been summarized, they are provided with an overview of their school's cultural type based on their responses in each of the four areas. Additionally, respondents receive a number of recommendations that focus on areas of improvement in each of the four sections of the survey.

Conclusion

Research demonstrates college-going culture matters for student success; students in schools characterized by "post-secondary forward" cultures are more likely to enroll in college, and dedicated advising can help combat fragmentation by reaching students who may not follow a traditional postsecondary pathway (Bettinger et al., 2019). To

date, practitioners have not had access to research-based tools to help them assess the CGC in their school, nor develop strategies for continuous improvement. Results of this study, including the diagnostic tool created from its analysis, help fill this gap both for researchers and the college access field.

APPENDIX A

TABLE 1

School Selection

School	Change in Enrollment Rate (2014-16	No. of Graduates (2016)	AP Participation (2014)	ACT Participation (2014)
Lower-performing				
School G	-6%	166	7%	49%
School F	-9%	174	9%	34%
School A	2%	233	2%	39%
Higher-performing				
School C	2%	171	8%	36%
School E	2%	123	10%	46%
School B	4%	128	8%	52%
School D	3%	138	13%	59%

TABLE 2

Interview breakdown

Stakeholder	2018	2019	Total
College Advisers	4	3	7
Teachers	31	18	49
Administrators	11	7	18
School Counselors	8	9	17
External Program Staff/Other	2	1	3
Students	64	51	115
Parents	13	13	26

TABLE 3

College-Going Culture Types

Postsecondary-Forward	Postsecondary-Debating	Postsecondary-Struggling
• High priority/expectations placed on college-going • Diverse coalition of involvement, including teachers and leadership • Broad range of academic and non-academic resources • May have environmental stability issues in terms of student population, but fewer issues around turnover and extreme academic issues like a state takeover • Fragmentation: minimal; broad student outreach - beyond seniors	• High-medium priority/mixed expectations around college-going (debate as to capabilities of students or best path for students) • Concentrated staff involvement, although still pockets of investment outside of counseling • Resources primarily limited to college-application preparation • Vary in terms of environmental stability issues • Fragmentation: primarily limited to seniors (with structures or practices in place/will be in place to reach more students)	• Low priority & expectations - overshadowed by other daily struggles • Primarily led by college adviser or senior counselor • Few resources geared towards college-going • Tend to have most extreme environmental stability issues in multiple areas (e.g. staffing, school performance, and student population) • Fragmentation: primarily triage, or limited to higher achieving seniors

References

Bettinger, E. P., Long, B. T., Oreopoulos, P., & Sanbonmatsu, L. (2012). The role of application assistance and information in college decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA experiment. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *127*(3), 1205-1242.

Bettinger, E., Antonio, A., Foster, J., & Orias, E. (2019). *College Advising Corps at Boston University 2014-2018: Final Evaluation Report.* Stanford, CA: Evaluation and Assessment Solutions for Education.

Bowen, W. G., Chingos, M. M., & McPherson, M. S. (2009). *Crossing the finish line: Completing college at America's public universities* (Vol. 52). Princeton University Press.

Dynarski, S. M., & Scott-Clayton, J. E. (2006). *The cost of complexity in federal student aid: Lessons from optimal tax theory and behavioral economics* (No. w12227). National Bureau of Economic Research.

Oakes, J., Rogers, J., Lipton, M., & Morrell, E. (2002). The social construction of college access. In W. G. Tierney & L. S. Hagedorn (Eds.), *Increasing access to college* (108–9). Albany: State University of New York Press.