

Student Perceptions of College Readiness

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Abstract

Virtually all high schools offer college and career guidance. However, once seniors graduate, little information is available to schools on the experiences of their students. This study explored college readiness through the lens of current college students. Utilizing an on-line survey, 86 college students reported their experiences, as well as offered suggestions to school counselors. .Overwhelmingly, students reported a need to increase the rigor of their course work, and to begin to transition toward a collegiate environment. The paper concludes with suggestions for school counselors on improving college readiness to ensure all students have equal access to ensure future success.

Key Words: Student Perceptions, College Readiness, Professional School Counselors, Guidance, High School

Student Perceptions of College Readiness

School counselors are often charged with ensuring the college and career readiness of all students (ASCA, 2012). Once students graduate, it is often difficult for counselors to know if their efforts have been useful and successful in preparing students. Social media has created an opportunity for high schools to remain in contact with their alumni, in a venue never before possible. This study focused on the perceived college readiness of current college students and on the methods and strategies that high school counselors can improve the delivery of college and career readiness guidance.

Statement of Problem

At the state and national levels, school counselors are expected to provide guidance in both academic and career options. The Texas education code goes as far as stating “The primary responsibility of a school counselor is to counsel students to fully develop each student's academic, career, personal, and social abilities” (ASCA, 2012, Texas Education Code, 2013). While this guidance is delivered, it is often difficult to measure the actual level of college readiness of high school students. Even using self-surveys, high school students often do not realize what skills are needed and expected until they are enrolled in college. This study sought to determine the perceived level of college readiness current college students actually attained while still in high school, by administering on-line survey.

College Readiness

Many definitions of college readiness exist; however, for purposes of this study, we chose to not define college readiness, and allow students to discuss and interpret their own perceptions' of college readiness. As a result for student interpretation of college readiness, the majority of students expressed concerns and inquiries about the admission process and

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financial aid supplements. While some conveyed the increased levels of rigor at the collegiate level.

Related Literature

Several researchers have focused on college readiness in students. The following studies range from perceptual studies of both college students and counselors, to empirical studies that examine college success rates in terms of completion and on-level courses taken. Gysbers (2013) suggested that school counselors served students by providing activities that “support student planning by giving emphasis to the development and use of decision-making, goal-setting, and planning skills” and by stressing “basic academic and career and technical education preparation skills” (p. 287). The relationship between guidance counselors and their students is central to successful implementation of these two tasks.

Solmonson et al (2014) conducted research on 1498 college freshmen in Texas, focusing on the students’ perceptions of high school counselors. The results suggested that, “Students have positive perceptions of their high school counselors regarding availability, confidentiality and trust, and guidance activities” (p. 2). Although there are areas to be improved, such as in providing college and career information, counselors showed great aptitude in building positive relationships and being available to help students. Gallant and Zhao’s (2011) study with high school students found that while 93% of students were aware of school counselors, only 85% reported being aware of college preparation service. By grade level, the lowest awareness of college preparation services was in the ninth grade class (75.9%), with a higher rate with the senior class (93.5%). Carey and Dimmitt (2012) noted the importance in manageable counselor to student ratios to ensure equal access to information by all students. “This research provides a

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clear imperative for all students to receive state-of-the-art, 21st-century college and career counseling services from qualified, professional school counselors” (p.150).

In addition to the connections between counselors and their students, the base of knowledge that students have regarding their chosen career fields is an important aspect of college readiness. Strom et al (2014) observed high school students and their choice of careers. Of the sample, 69% were still making career decisions. From this group, several factors were determined as important in making career decisions. Students listed the most important factors as “Salary and benefits (74%), satisfaction with the job (52%), and having a reasonable work schedule (28%)” (p. 169). Advisors were noted for suggesting two primary areas: satisfaction and salary. Yet even once students have settled on a career interest, it is imperative that students are able to be academically successful in the necessary college courses.

Porter and Polikoff (2012) found that while many Americans go to college, a large percentage of them are required to take remedial courses. The percentage of remedial courses varies from 20% at universities offering advanced degrees, to 60% at community colleges. Similarly, Lombardi, Seburn, and Conley (2011) studied observed major factors associated with college readiness in high school students: (a) goal-driven behaviors, (b) persistence, (c) study skills, and (d) self-monitoring. Findings included that students with higher development of college and career goals and the associated skills have an advantage, and require fewer remedial courses.

Finally, the Savitz-Romer (2012) study of 11 urban counselors found two major themes in working with students on college and career readiness. One was that students had low and misinformed college expectations that included “Low postsecondary expectations, unrealistic professional aspirations, and a lack of accurate information about educational requirements

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influenced their everyday work” (p. 103). The second major concern was an overall lack of post-secondary knowledge, including “The benefits, actual (tuition and other fees) and opportunity costs (salary lost by not entering the workforce or loss of time away from family), and culture and realities of attending college” (p. 104). These data point clearly to the complex counselor competencies that are needed to address students’ college and career readiness.

Methodology

While survey data has often been associated with empirical studies, technological advances have allowed researchers and scholars to create new opportunities and avenues to gather data reaching a wider source of participants, through on-line survey technology. This study utilized the data collection portal, Survey Monkey, to collect, sort, and analyze the data. The link could be forwarded to any college student who previously received services from a high school college readiness program. As a result, the link created a snowballing recruitment method. For purposes of this study, social media was used to connect with current college students. An on-line survey was created that addressed student perceptions of their level of college readiness. Current college students were asked to take the survey, and to share on their own Facebook pages. The students then shared the survey 11 times with other individuals. This does not count any times the survey was sent as a direct message, which is not documented on Facebook. Institutional Review approved the questions in the survey, and approved the use of social media as a means to deliver the survey. The survey items included both open response items and Likert based responses. Samples of the questions are stated below:

1. What year of college are you in? (Single Response)
2. What is your major? (Open Response)
3. How prepared for college do you feel that you were, while in high school?
4. Where did you receive most of your college information?
 - School Counselor; Teachers; Websites; Friends/Family; Other
5. How prepared were you in regards to admissions?

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6. How prepared were you in regards to selecting classes?
7. How prepared were you in regards to paying for school?
8. How prepared were you in regards to the academic demands of college?
9. If you could go back and redo any part of your college preparation while in high school, what would it be? (Open Response)
10. What advice would you give to school counselors on preparing high school students for college? (Open Response)

Data Analysis

The survey program calculated responses to Likert items and single response items. Responses are reported in table and graph forms in the findings sections. Free response items were analyzed based on text, including similar response items, and word counts. After an initial coding of responses, different reviewers were presented the themes and student responses to ensure validity on free response items through multiple analyses.

Limitations

While the ease of on-line surveys provided access to large number of participants, some limitations should be noted. Due to the anonymous nature of the survey, it is impossible to determine if all participants were currently enrolled in college. Further, the nature of the free response questions, did not allow researchers to follow up with clarifying questions or to ask for detail. Additionally, the small sample size may not reflect a diverse population. Finally, as students provided no identifying information, generalizations cannot be made concerning certain themes pertaining to gender, ethnicity, or Socio Economic Status (SES).

Participants

The study consisted of responses from 86 students. The initial survey was posted to social media sites, and current students were asked to share with friends. Students reported a wide variety of college majors. While student major was not a factor of interest, the student's years in college provided some context of the experience level of the participants. Forty- seven students

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were in their first or second year of college. The remaining students were in their later portion of their undergraduate degree.

Findings

The results of the survey provided a glimpse at the perceptions of college readiness as experienced by college students. Several patterns emerged in data analysis. One major theme was the primary sources of college information for students when they were in high school. Students were only allowed to select one from the list. Websites were the primary source for most of the students, although it was not clarified whether these were university websites, or high school campus counseling websites that provided information. Family and friends accounted for 27 responses, and school counselors were listed 17 times. Only six students listed their teachers as their primary source of data.

Likert Based Questions

While the majority of students report being “Very Prepared” and “Prepared” in most categories, there is still room for improvement for school counselors to provide basic information regarding admissions, course selections, and funding. Concerns in preparing students for the rigors of college, is something to be addressed by school counselors, and it must also be reflected in the high school course work. Increased rigor and expectations from high school teachers will far better prepare students; this is illustrated clearly in the free response items. Table 1 illustrates the responses to the Likert based questions.

Table 1

Student Responses to College Preparation

N=86

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	Very Prepared	Prepared	Neutral	Unprepared	Very Unprepared	No Response
How prepared were you in regards to admissions?	18	27	23	15	2	1
How prepared were you in regards to selecting classes?	9	32	16	24	5	n/a
How prepared were you in regards to paying for school?	19	22	28	6	11	n/a
How prepared were you in regards to the academic demands of college?	11	27	19	18	11	n/a

Free Response Items

The free response questions allowed the students to have a voice in their perceptions, and are considered the major source of data for this study. The questions are reported separately, with examples of student responses to justify each theme. Several responses fit into multiple themes, but they are referenced in the total count of responses for each theme, so the number of themes may exceed the number of total responses.

If you could go back and redo any part of your college preparation while in high school, what would it be? (Open Response- 77 responses). Several themes were identified based on student responses. The themes developed from these responses included: Applications/Earlier Action- 14 responses, Money/Financial/Scholarships- 17 responses, Self Improvement (Study harder) - 27 responses, Increased Rigor- 16 responses, School Choice- 13 responses, and Other- 3 responses

Applications/Earlier Action

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Students reported a need to act earlier in their college search and application processes. Additionally, many reported a greater need to conduct a more thorough research for their perspective colleges. For example, responses such as “Apply and do all the paperwork well in advanced” and “Applying earlier. Never even heard the terms ‘early action’ and ‘early decision’ until it was too late” emphasis the need for earlier actions in the application process. One student also noted, “Decide early which college to go to and then research the academics of that college (which classes to take, specific degree plan, etc). Do this before deciding for each college you apply to if possible.”

Money/Financial/Scholarships

Several students cited the desire for financial planning on their part: “Fill out more scholarships applications” and “Set up a savings account and put money aside.” Further, the students looked for ways to make college affordable, “Don't be turned down by the idea of a junior college first and then transferring to a 4 year school. It will save you financially and emotionally.” One student also suggested the need for “Applying for more scholarships and getting work experience while also saving up for paying off student loans.” This aspect of college readiness was the second highest in regards to how students would have changed their high school preparations.

Self Improvement (Study Harder)

The desire to have increased their study skills was by far the highest response received. Responses such as, “I would have learned how to study more efficiently” or desires for increased time management skills, and “Learning better study habits and more critical thinking” show this concern. Another student noted, “I would have really pushed myself harder. In high school, they do not really teach you how to study. Students are handed the answers and are expected to

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remember rather than find the answers out themselves. Other students wished they “had been more engaged in the community and spent more time learning outside of the classroom” or that they had focused more on improving their writing skills.

Increased Rigor

By increasing their rigor, and taking more classes that would earn college credit, students expressed a desire to get ahead in the college work, especially in core requirements. Students reported wishing they had taken “the ACT along with my SAT [and] Taking more AP tests.” Increased enrollment in AP classes appeared several times throughout the student responses, “I would probably make myself take either more Advanced Placement classes to get used to the workload or try to take classes more related to my major.”

School Choice

A major theme that developed in reading student responses was the desire to have more information when making choices about what school or college to attend. Students seemed to feel that had they had more information, they might have made different choices that would have placed them into a school that was a better fit. Students reported a desire to know more about their potential schools, majors and the towns in which those schools were located, “I would have looked more into all the different types of majors my selected college had to offer.” Another student noted the need for far more planning,

“1.) Have a backup plan. 2.) Have another backup plan. I had already been admitted to my #1 school when I lost my spot because the school made a major typo in my admissions paperwork. So, I had to choose a new school to attend instead of my dream school 3.) Consider Community college 4.) Take the ACT if you can. If I had taken the ACT, I could have applied to schools like Rice.”

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Several students made mention of the need for more information when making these decisions.

What advice would you give to school counselors on preparing high school students for

college? (Open Response- 75 Responses) Again, researchers used student responses to identify several themes. The themes that were developed from the students' answers were:

Money/Financial/Scholarships- 14 responses, College Applications- 8 responses, College Research- 29 responses, Transition to College- 30 responses, College Credits while in High School- 8 responses, College Rigor/Higher Standards- 22 responses, and Other- 11 responses.

Money/Financial/Scholarships

Money and paying for college was a major concern of students. Students suggested a much more comprehensive approach to financial planning, that included regular meetings, providing scholarship search websites to students, and even help in completing forms, such as financial aid and scholarship applications.

Give them lots and lots of websites where they can apply for scholarships, particularly ones that had little competition. Also, start early like freshman year this will give them time to prepare. And try to perhaps plan visits to their counselors once a month or two in case they have any questions about applications, information on the schools of their choice or help in picking a school. There are a lot of students who are indecisive about their future who could really use a good push in the right direction.”

Another student was concerned by the cost of higher education, “Counselors make it sound like either your parents suddenly pull money off trees or that loans are these magical things that rain from the sky. I could have used more help in finding scholarships, learning how to apply for loans.”

College Applications

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Though only mentioned eight times, this aspect of college preparation does deserve attention. The college application process can be overwhelming; especially to students without family supports that have completed college applications before. One concern expressed the need to look at more choices, “Emphasize the options that students at higher level schools, not just the schools that they can easily get into.” Another student suggested that counselors,

Make sure they know how to pay and apply. Let them know how challenging college really is. College is a lot harder than high school. It is far more demanding. They cannot get by with what they were doing in high school and expect to succeed in college.

A final aspect was to ensure applications are completed early, “Have time to send applications in before the Fall Semester ends so that kids have a better chance at scholarships and having more choices of where to go.”

College Research

Students requested that counselors be able to spend more time with students in helping them research colleges and have a wide selection of schools that are a good fit for them and their intended majors. “Help them with looking into a school that will serve their major well but also be good for their fallback major because right now I know some freshmen here who already have to transfer.” One student wanted future college students to know,

Take college enrollment seriously, it is your future! Understand that you need to pick a good school for your price range that offers much financial aid and/or scholarships. Also, go to the school with the best education for you that you believe will benefit your future.

Another sub-theme that developed was the need for counselors to cover and address all postsecondary setting such as community colleges, trade schools, universities, and the military academies. “Don't short change them. Also, don't rule out technical schools when students ask

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about college. Getting a welding certificate or becoming a dental hygienist isn't a bad thing and college isn't the only thing after high school.”

Transition to College

Many students stated major surprises in the differences between high school and college. “Teach more time management skills and disciplines.” They suggested a greater need to provide transitional steps. One idea that appeared in the responses is the need to make students more accountable, and not have teachers provide the same level of support they saw in early high school years. “Inform them how important it is to be able to listen. Lectures are a common class type and I struggle taking notes without visual aids.” Another student suggested, “Students should be prepared for more responsibility, treat them like adults.” While this relates to increased rigor, it is also a sign of a need for increased independence of students. Although the desire for more independence appeared several times, one student felt that counselors should, “Remind students about dates; like when the school has testing, when common app is due, etc.”

College Credit while in High School

Students noted that by taking courses in high school that would earn college credit they could begin to get ahead in their majors. Many students see this as a cost savings measure. By advancing through one semester to one full year of college, students see themselves acquiring less debt. Likewise, increased enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) appeared several times, “Encourage them to take AP classes and volunteer since that looks good on college applications” and “Suggest advanced placement classes (even if just one!) to help prepare for stress levels and amounts of work that comes with college classes.” Another student noted that,

Preparation in high school may seem unnecessary or not relevant at that point in their life- but that it is the cheapest and EASIEST way to keep you from having to waste time

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with basics when you could be taking better classes or putting time into clubs, Greek life or extra circulars.

College Rigor/Higher Standards

The theme of increased rigor is noted in students' responses, and across different themes. The participants suggested that it was important for the next generation of college going students to know that their individual learning styles and preferences may not be of interest to college professors, who would teach in a fashion that suited their own needs, rather than how students preferred to learn. "Make sure that they are ready to write tons of papers and not being able to get your way with your teachers. They are not there to babysit you anymore so when a deadline is given, it's due that day or nothing." This echoes the ideas mentioned in the transition to college theme since enforcement of deadlines, and less support, forces students to become learners that are more independent.

I would really push for all juniors and seniors to have at least one semester of a "trial" college class. Have an actual college professor come in and teach them on a college level and expect college level work. There needs to be a mandatory class for kids to get some real life experience on how to get a job, hold a job, manage money in a day-to-day basis. Making good grades is just one small element of the college experience. Also, they need to be shown more adult situations of how to handle things that you don't go through at a younger age. Kids are made to go to school every day, but there's no one forcing you to go to college class every day. Also, how different teaching/grading/and personality styles are in college. Students need to be aware of which teachers they might do better with.

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A final student noted the need for improved reading, and attending classes, “I have had to read more material for one college class than I did in all my high school classes combined on any given year...don't skip class, you will miss material.”

Discussion

The data suggested that students had many varied experiences about their college preparation, as well as exposing a need for expanding the role of school counselors in that process. Generational students especially need an increased level of support in navigating the college process. These supports should come in the form of helping students and families with applications and financial aid applications. To be most effective the support needs to begin before the students' senior year, such as end of junior year. In addition, the supports need to be available to students not only during the school day, but also in evenings and weekends, to accommodate working families.

Further, to support all students in their care, school counselors must have manageable caseloads, that allow them to meet with students and families individually and on a regular basis. Some examples include: (a) removing non-guidance activities, such as state testing, and (b) allowing the college specialist on campuses to maximize their time with students. In this expanded time, counselors can help students make course selections, increase rigor in their high schools courses through expanded college level classes, and assist students in selecting majors and courses relevant to that particular college major. With such large caseloads, counselors often have to rely on mass media solutions, such as websites to supply a large amount of information to students and families. While these are useful repositories of information, websites cannot replace the need for face-to-face interaction, and the ability of students and families to ask questions.

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Students also reported value from hearing from their peer group. This may suggest the need to provide an opportunity for college freshmen to return to campus and share their experiences in a panel format, provide college visits/field trips to students, and bring in college admission officers to help students transition into the college world. Students may also benefit from a curricular intervention, such as having senior level courses align with more realistic college expectations, and focusing on higher-level assignments, in addition to other assignments that expose them to completing college essays/applications/financial aid/scholarship searches.

Several resources may be available to counselors and schools that aid students in preparing for college. Cranmore and Akins (2014) provided some basic lesson plans that help students begin to explore the career aspects of their future, as well as beginning the college search process. The College Board (n.d.) also provides free resources for college planning in their downloadable CollegeEd curriculum, which offers guidance activities for grades 7-12. Additional resources from universities, such as a financial aid and grant specialist, would benefit students. The university personnel could provide knowledge about the cost of college and opportunities available through scholarships, grants, and financial aid.

Future Research

Based on the findings, several possibilities are open to schools to gain further insight into student perceptions of college and career readiness. One aspect to consider would be to gather current high school student's perceptions while they are in high school. This study focused on students that were currently in college. By expanding the survey to include current students and their parents, school counselors, administrators, and teachers may gain a better understanding of the needs of their students, and how to meet those needs.

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A second aspect to consider in developing this research would be to include identifying information in further surveys. If specific patterns can be found in SES status, or in First Generational students, intensive interventions may be focused to support those students and families. In addition, schools may wish to track the progress of these students into college, to measure the effectiveness of those interventions.

A third aspect to consider for further study is the relationship of college preparation to counselor caseload. If counselors with lower caseloads have more time to prepare students and families for college, then schools create an unfair advantage for students with more school counselor access. Removing barriers to access to information must be a key goal of schools, if they wish to see improved levels of college and career readiness.

Conclusion

To foster college and career readiness in all students, school leaders, such as administrators and counselors, must first understand the level of readiness of current college students. School administrators and school counselors play a pivotal role in providing much of the foundation for college and career readiness in students. Even with this small sample, there is evidence to suggest that while many students have some preliminary college information before they attend; there is room for growth in the guidance curriculum across the country.

By allowing school counselors to focus on students' needs to prepare for college, rather than non-counseling duties, school counselors can be positioned to deliver this information to students and families. Increased access to information is a vital key to helping prepare high school students for the rigors of college, and it is imperative for schools to ensure an equitable distribution of this information to all students. All students need access to information and support for (a) the application process, (b) researching colleges and majors, (c) locating financial

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sources to fund education, and (d) making the transition from high school to college. As a well-educated populace is critical to maintain a democratic society, ensuring that the next generation is prepared for the demands of postsecondary education should be a major concern. The study of students' own perceptions of their college and career readiness should be a guiding factor in policy changes that relate to school guidance programs.

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